AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 3【中】

著●川上稔
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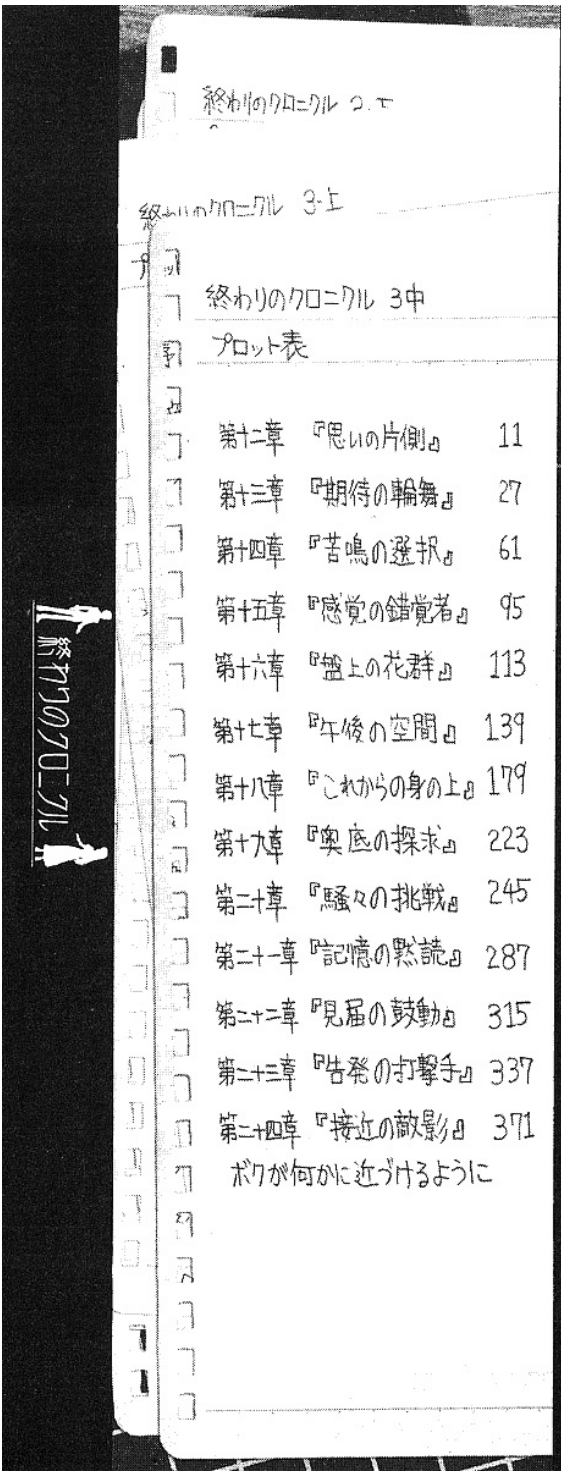
電撃文庫

The Ending Chronicle

Act.03

3
【中】

—Everyone,
Let us follow the path leading to the end.
So that we might settle this.



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ボクが何かに近づけるように

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03

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

田宮家
実家代わり

佐山の両親
既に他界

元護国課

?
佐山・薫
養父

ジークフリート
図書館司書

アブラム
実働部部長

大城・宏昌
技術者

飛場・竜徹
道場主

学校・生徒会関係

大樹先生
担当・顧問

出雲・覚
会長

風見・千里
会計

佐山・御言

大城・至
監督

Sf
至の侍女

シビュレ
整備役

ボルドマン
連携役

大城・一夫
困った老人

ディアナ
独逸UCAT

3rd-G

月読・京
月読の娘

モイラ姉妹
自動人形侍女

アポルオン
3rdの主人

ヘカトンケイル
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新庄・運／切
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ブレンヒルト
美術部部長

2nd-G

鹿島・昭緒
2nd-Gの軍神

月読・史弦
開発部部長

3rdを追う者

美影
自動人形?

飛場・竜司
ややエロ

UCAT関係

Chapter 12

“One Side of Their Feelings”

One side is lost
One side is gained
Where can both sides be found?

●

The battlefield was on the move.

It was morning on the two lane road leading into Taka-Akita Academy through the main entrance.

The concept space left the campus deserted and the road continued in a straight line for fifty meters after passing through the gate. At that point, it reached a schoolyard and took a ninety degree turn to the left.

Aigaion who was carrying blonde Mikage and Gyes who wore a red suit continued on past that corner.

About a dozen meters behind them, two motorcycles entered through the gate. Both had a large engine displacement, but one had a cowl and the other did not. The former was driven by the short boy named Hiba and the latter contained Izumo and Kazami.

Izumo recklessly turned the corner from the main road and Gyes opened her mouth while running ahead.

She held up a metal board containing a philosopher's stone.

"We will add on another concept!" she shouted.

A moment later, the small metal board burst and the world changed.

- **—People understand each other's feelings.**

"Ha ha," she laughed. "This ridiculous concept was created by rearranging the concept allowing humans to combine with machines, but it's quite effective against human enemies."

And…

"Rejoice in your newfound understanding, humans!"

●

While riding on Izumo's bike, Kazami heard Gyes.

…What kind of concept is it!?

She focused on her surroundings for a moment, but she could detect nothing strange with her senses. She did not notice anything amiss with gravity, sound, wind, light, or the form and state of matter.

Then what is it? she wondered just as she noticed something.

The scene around her was somehow different from earlier. The back of Izumo's dress shirt had been visible before, but now she saw something else directly in front of her.

"The motorcycle's console?"

The familiar site of Izumo's arms extended from the right and left to hold the grips.

She moved her head to look at herself and realized what had happened.

"Did Kaku and I…?"

"We were switched out."

The slightly high-pitched voice from behind caused Kazami to shudder.

She frantically looked back and found herself. To see if Izumo was inside, she asked a probing question.

"Um… Is that you inside me, Kaku?"

"No? Don't be silly. I'm Chisato. …Gwah! You're willing to punch yourself!?"

"I don't give a coquettish smile like that when I talk, so stop teasing me. …Oh, no! I just punched myself without thinking!? Am I okay?"

"Y-yeah. It might be your delicate build, but I'm feeling a bit dizzy."

"Ahh, I can't believe I ended up hurting myself like this!"

"Face forward, Chisato!"

It was weird being ordered around by herself, but she looked forward.

The ninety degree left turn was coming up and the schoolyard lay directly ahead. To their right, Hiba tilted his motorcycle to turn along with them.

"Hurry up and take the corner! I can't turn with you there!"

Not only would they cut off Hiba's path, but they would drive right into the schoolyard.

A white curb formed the borderline between the schoolyard and road, so driving across it would mean a several dozen centimeter drop followed by a screen.

Kazami let out a cry, but she did not have a motorcycle license.

"Kaku! What am I supposed to do!?"

"Don't lighten up on the accelerator!"

She obeyed her own voice's instructions. With her arms and legs fixed in place, her body wrapped its arms around her current body. The heat and softness of the body pressing against her back surprised her a bit.

…*Maybe I can be a bit more confident in myself.*

A moment later, her own body behind her quickly tilted to the left.

"!"

Unable to resist, she tilted to the left as well.

The high speed flow of air around them changed.

The motorcycle tilted and took the position for turning left, but it was not enough. Hiba was circling in from the right on the outside track and he was going to hit them on the right.

…*Not good!*

She made her decision in an instant. First, she tried to remember how Izumo always handled the cornering.

She took in a breath, hunched down in the seat, and pushed backwards.

By moving her center of gravity back, she put more weight on the back wheel. That weight exceeded the frictional limit of the tire, so it began skidding and slid to the side, effectively sharpening the turn.

As Hiba came from the right, he twisted the accelerator and moved ahead as he forced his way around the corner.

He charged through the one meter gap between Izumo's sideways drifting motorcycle and the schoolyard curb.

"I'll be going on ahead!"

As he passed through, their back tire regained its grip and they were facing the way out of the corner.

"We'll be going too!"

She twisted the accelerator, the roar of the engine stopped the motorcycle from vibrating, and they shot forward.

The motorcycle raced along the curb forming a boundary with the schoolyard.

She drove in a gouging arc to return from the curb to the asphalt.

"Can you handle this, Chisato!?" asked a voice behind her.

"I can manage!" she shouted back while facing Izumo's body forward.

Hiba's motorcycle was now several meters ahead, but they were back on track.

The two automatons ran about twenty meters ahead of him. On their current path, they would pass by the general school buildings and reach the gravel path to the student dormitories.

"Izumo-san," asked Hiba as he looked over his shoulder.

"What is it?" shouted the voice behind Kazami.

Hiba looked confused.

"Why has Kazami-san been speaking like a guy and why has Izumo-san started acting gay!?"

"You haven't caught on!? We were swapped out by that concept! Your mind is swapped out with a person who understands your feelings!"

The look on Hiba's face changed when he heard that

He looked surprised initially, but then the look darkened a bit.

…Eh?

Kazami tilted her head and quickly found the answer to her question.

She had been swapped out with Izumo, but Hiba had not been swapped out with Mikage.

The condition seemed to be understanding each other's feelings.

…And being human.

Regretting what she had said, she debated whether to give a meaningless apology.

"Hiba!"

Her own voice shouted out as the motorcycle moved onto the gravel path.

"Continue after them! This is our home turf, so don't let these outsiders have their way here!"

"M-me!?"

"Of course. You're our underclassmen, the opening act, the newcomer, and the rookie fighter who gets scared too easily. But don't worry. If you are defeated, we can show up and dramatically announce that you were the weakest of our group."

Hiba ignored Izumo and twisted the accelerator, but Izumo continued speaking.

"Go! We just need to make a few adjustments and we'll be right after you!"

Her own leg placed its basketball shoe on her current left foot and pressed down to lock the rear wheel brake. Gravel flew into the air and the motorcycle came to a stop.

“What are you doing, Kaku?”

She turned around and saw herself nod, click her tongue, and fold her arms.

“This is a real pain. I’ll drive, but I’m not sure how well I can control the bike in your body.”

“That’s true… But you’re pretty tall, you know that? I’m amazed by how high up I am.”

“Yeah, and your body is strangely light, soft, and hard to use.”

“Stop casually opening my shirt and groping my breasts!”

Her own body waved a hand to calm her down and then stepped off the motorcycle. Her current self moved to the back and her body sat in front. She had never noticed how slender her body was.

…This giant bike doesn’t suit me at all.

Her body tilted its head while straddling the seat in a skirt.

“It feels weird sitting like this. The, uh…crotch area is… How should I put it?”

“Say anything more and I’ll chop this one off.”

Izumo silently gripped the clutch and put the motorcycle in gear.

Good, good, she thought while embracing the back in front of her like usual.

“Kwah! Ch-Chisato, that’s quite a bear hug.”

“Huh? Is this too tight?”

She let go and her body gasped for breath and waved a hand in defeat. This was going to be tricky.

At any rate, she wrapped her current arms around her body’s waist. She did so hesitantly and he laughed from her mouth after catching his breath.

He twisted the accelerator and the motorcycle moved forward while shaking. As they approached the sounds of Hiba’s motorcycle up ahead, she muttered aloud.

“This is a new experience, but we’ll just have to trust each other!”

●

Hiba pursued Aigaion after leaving Kazami and Izumo behind.

They had left the line of school buildings and reached the line of boys’ dorms on the northwest end of Taka-Akita Academy. He was currently racing westward between the lines of dormitories.

Ahead of him was an automaton carrying Mikage. He was apparently one of the three Hecatoncheires. Gyes was supported by a god of war and Cottus was as large as a god of war, so he had fought the two of them on land or air a few times in the past, but he had never seen this human-sized one before. He had only heard his name from his grandfather.

After Aigaion parted ways with Gyes, he continued running while

carrying Mikage.

Hiba pursued him despite knowing he was being lured somewhere.

The automaton outdid him in size, strength, and athleticism. Aigaion ran inside the western entrance of a dorm and easily ran down the dark corridor at the same speed as a motorcycle.

…Is this the true strength of an automaton?

They were not human yet made similar to humans, but they definitely surpassed humans.

Hiba then wondered if Mikage was the same.

He was not sure.

He continued to think about long ago and his earliest memories of Mikage.

On Christmas Eve ten years before, his father had brought her to them and she had suddenly awoken the following day.

Her joints and general appearance had been more doll-like than now and her mind had been on the level of an infant.

He had initially been afraid of her because she was not human, but his view had changed after his grandfather had spoken with him.

…She will eventually become human.

Just as his grandfather had said, he had spent five years with her as she evolved. At first, his mother had taken Mikage around, but once he had seen her start to evolve, he had always been the one to push her wheelchair.

…She is an automaton that can approach humanity if she wishes for it.

Mikage had wanted to become human.

While travelling between his grandfather’s dojo, home, and other places, she had experienced and gained many things. She had gained the five senses of a human, she had gained real skin, flesh, nails, and hair, and she had gained so much more as well.

Back then, a girl his grandfather had taken in had attended the dojo. She was older than him and she had trained alongside him, but Hiba had focused on the fact that Mikage was with him and that he believed she would eventually become human.

She was unable to walk properly and she could not speak, but he had believed it would happen eventually.

But five years ago, the girl he had adored like an elder sister had

suddenly disappeared, Mikage had cried, and something had arrived.

After leaving his grandfather's dojo, a giant green armored warrior had appeared before him.

He had been blown away in an instant and he had felt his forehead split open and the pain of broken ribs.

Mikage had caught his short body from her wheelchair and he had passed out.

The next thing he had known, the armored warrior had laid defeated before him.

He had looked down at its broken body from high up and he had realized his own body was a giant black armored warrior.

Hiba remembered being ejected to the ground from the armored warrior and he remembered Mikage falling down from overhead.

A shallow wound had remained on his forehead, but the injury to his ribs was gone.

In exchange, Mikage's ribs had been broken.

And from that point onwards, her evolution had stopped.

…She protected me back then!

He had forced her to protect him. He had made her call in the god of war and his injuries had been transferred to her when he had joined with it.

It was all because I couldn't protect her, he thought. *She wants the power to fight, so she's stopped her human evolution to seek her power as an automaton.*

He believed that was what had stopped her evolution.

He twisted the accelerator.

He sent the motorcycle and himself into the dark corridor Aigaion had run down.

"I…"

He could not finish his sentence.

No matter how much he fought and won from now on, he could not change the fact that he was being protected.

She was the one that held the power to end this fight.

…What should I do?

"I…!"

With that word, he charged into the student dorm.

●

It was 7:27 AM.

Two things happened on the helicopter landing zone to the side of UCAT's long range runways.

Two white pallets sent to the surface via the cargo lift began to vibrate.

Sibyl had intentionally left those three meter pallets off of the helicopter.

As Ooshiro supervised, the landing zone maintenance workers and the development department members circled around the two pallets from a distance. As they did, the vibrations intensified.

"The lock is releasing," said a young man from the development department.

True enough, the locks on the thin three meter pallets burst open. They both did so at the same moment as if they wanted to be together.

With the sound of shattering metal, the two pallets opened and a large sword and long spear flew into the air.

They both had streamlined forms made from white and black and they moved further into the morning sky. Sounds resembling clanging metal fragments seemed to fill the surrounding air and the two weapons stood vertically with their tips turned heavenward.

The sword and spear shook just once.

That single action knocked away the fragments of the locks still clinging to them.

After a moment, the armor panels on the sides and top of the blades opened.

As they exposed their thrusters, green light filled the activating consoles and activation signals blinked on various parts like a pulse.

Their activation text appeared on the consoles and they named themselves.

"V-Sw. Contact – OK."

"G-Sp2. Contact – OK."

Seeing that, the tension left Ooshiro's shoulders.

"So the dragons obey the heroes who subdued them."

"Good morning," displayed V-Sw with a gentle twist of its body.

G-Sp2 made a similar twist next to it.

“Did you call for us?”

“Did we call for you?” repeated Ooshiro. After a moment, he clapped his hands together. “Oh, I was just thinking I needed a good backscratcher!”

“Not a chance.”

“Oh, c’mon!!”

As everyone else nodded as if that was the proper way to handle the old man, Ooshiro looked back up and saw the same question as before on the console.

“I didn’t call for you,” he said. “But your masters have called you to the playground of dragons.”

As if nodding, the two blades lightly tapped against each together.

That metallic noise was followed by an identical message on both their consoles.

“We are off to have some fun.”

The two weapons that contained dragons soared into the air.

They first sank down a bit, but then they shot up toward the heavens.

All Ooshiro and the others sensed was an explosion of wind, a sound like a bursting paper bag, and several people being knocked away by the wind.

“Look in the sky…”

The dragon weapons had vanished, but two white lines remained in their place.

The two lines of steam gently curved into the southern sky and the sound of their departure echoed throughout the area.

Ooshiro did not bother fixing his lab coat as it flapped in the wind and he raised his right thumb toward the southern sky.

“That was a little over-the-top, but it saves us the effort of transporting them.”

Chapter 13

“Round Dance of Expectation”

Think and dance, human and one with human form
With any luck, this will raise the Coppelia reproduction rate

●

Hiba drove his motorcycle from the morning courtyard and into the five-story boys' dormitory.

…Hurry.

In that deserted concept space, the morning sun dimly lit the inside of the building. The difference was enough to feel like complete darkness at first, but that helped eliminate any hesitation left in his thoughts.

He twisted the accelerator without hesitation.

"!"

Supported by the large engine displacement, the tires dug into the plastic floor.

Their grip created speed and the motorcycle raced along the corridor.

Surrounded by his speed and the reverberating noises of the engine, he caught sight of his target up ahead.

…There he is!

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw Aigaion two meters ahead.

He held Mikage over his shoulder as he ran and he turned around to look at Hiba in midair.

He was smiling.

"Allow me to introduce myself again, descendent of Hiba!"

He leaped calmly through the air and leaped again as soon as he landed.

"I am Aigaion, one of the Hecatoncheires. My height is 2 meters 31 centimeters, my weight is 150 kilos, I work at a greengrocer, and my hobby is pachinko! What about you!?"

"I'm not the type to introduce myself to guys!"

Aigaion reacted to Hiba's answer with a laugh.

"Ha ha," he laughed loudly as he landed. "How boring!"

With another laugh, he ran backwards and swung his left arm toward the concrete wall to his side.

His large hand smashed the manmade wall. With a splashing sound, his hand sank into the wall up to the wrist and he did not stop there.

As he ran, he tore a wrist-sized line in the wall.

Sounds of destruction and concrete fragments scattered everywhere as he ran and destroyed the wall.

“Dolls are not human, and so there is something they need. They need a selling point as an artificial product. Just as the mass-produced automatons can control gravity and the Moirai manage humans, we have our own selling points.”

“And what is that?”

Aigaion’s eyebrows stood up, but his smile deepened.

“In my case, I have extremely precise and flashy gravitational control.”

He twisted up the wrist jammed into the wall as if grabbing something and tearing it out.

His giant hand held something as he pulled it from the wall.

It was a thick and round piece of steel. More specifically, it was the primary portion of the reinforced concrete used to construct the building.

“It is time you fell, metal structure that stands in rebellion to the earth!”

As soon his voice rang out, Hiba heard the sound of something gigantic collapsing.

By the time he realized it was the earth trembling, the sudden shaking threw his motorcycle into the air.

He remained in the air for over a second.

“…!”

The tires bounced off the plastic floor and then settled down. After spinning through the air, they dug into the floor once more.

At the same time, the ceiling and walls collapsed like a closing book.

Aigaion’s gravitational control spread through the rebar frame and easily bent the entire thing.

The boys’ dorm was imploding.

“What!?”

The destruction showed itself through smashing concrete and wood.

The chain of breaking materials passed by over Hiba’s head and swallowed up the ceiling, columns, walls, and rooms lining the corridor.

Once the walls split apart, the ceiling fell and carried four floor’s

worth of volume with it.

Hiba decided to do two things: escape the destruction and retrieve Mikage.

There was only one way to accomplish both.

“Either way, I have to chase after you!!”

He pushed the accelerator to its limit and the motorcycle shot forward.

The sound of the engine pierced through the sounds of breaking concrete, the sounds of bending and shattering reinforced glass, and the sounds of everything creaking. But Aigaion did not stop laughing.

“Keep at it, keep at it. But it’s over, descendent of Hiba!”

“You…”

Hiba lowered down and gathered even more strength in his hand on the accelerator.

“You don’t get to decide that it’s over!”

“I do when I’m the one ending it!”

And…

“I will make you even more boring than you already are!”

With that said, Aigaion raised Mikage above his head.

…That’s dangerous!

Hiba almost shouted that thought aloud, but then Mikage’s body crumbled.

“…!?”

He then saw the truth. What he had assumed was Mikage was just a clump of metal rubble. The clothes were just a gathering of white sand-like components.

“Ha ha ha! This is a doll of trash and rubble I put together with my gravitational control! How do you like that? It’s a doll made by a doll. Gyes took the real one and went on ahead!”

“What…?”

Hiba gulped.

…I was in such a hurry, I fell for a fake!

His resentment led to anger.

“You damn con artist!!”

“Quiet. It’s your fault for letting me trick you!!”

He’s right, thought Hiba as he clenched his teeth.

The accelerator was already at its limit, so he focused on

switching gears while ignoring the downpour of rubble.

He thought about the concept space. If metal was alive…

"Please," he said to the motorcycle. "Please let me catch up!"

The mass of metal answered his call. After trembling for an instant, its engine let out a cry, and the accelerator itself seemed to begin racing.

"…!"

The motorcycle lowered its center of gravity. It lowered its suspension almost to the limit, bit into the shaking floor, and eliminated all wasted tire rotation.

Forward.

The motorcycle whipped up the wind and raced between the falling ceiling and collapsing walls.

But…

"Am I not going to make it?"

Aigaion leaped outside of the western entrance twenty meters ahead, but the overhead collapse was already settled. The boys' dormitory would be completely destroyed before Hiba made it out.

Shit, he thought without letting up on the accelerator.

At the same time, he heard a voice and an approaching motorcycle outside.

"Hiba!"

It was Kazami's female voice, so it was Izumo speaking.

Before he could wonder what he wanted, the female voice spoke again.

"Keep low! We'll blow it all away!"

A moment later, the boys' dorm was completely destroyed.

●

Kazami and Izumo's motorcycle charged toward the southern side of the crumbling boys' dorm.

After locking the back wheel and drifting the side, the two of them raised their right hands and shouted in unison.

"Come!"

An instant later, two white lines flew from the northern sky and struck near the back of the building's third floor.

The shock of that impact stopped the collapse.

This created a short blank period.

All the smoke and shaking from the collapse was knocked into the air in a slight moment of relative calm.

“!”

And then silent and invisible explosions occurred at the two points of impact.

This was similar to the shockwave created when a massive shell struck at high speed.

This shockwave went beyond the realm of sound and raced across the northern side of the dormitory. It tore away the rubble, glass, and surface materials in an instant and an explosion of steam burst from both points of impact.

Two loud noises and two impacts followed.

Aigaion had created a downward collapse, but these two attacks had changed that to explosions scattering in every direction. The five-story building bent, twisted, and broke as if it had been struck by two uppercuts.

A great rumbling raced out and it did not end there.

Amid the destruction that sounded like a beast’s roar, light appeared on the northern side of the building.

It was the light of dragons. The light formed two dragons creating a giant helix.

The dragon light swallowed up the destroyed fragments, formed a circle, and absorbed it all.

The boys’ dormitory was annihilated.

All that remained was the first floor which had escaped the destruction.

“I owe you one!”

As well as Hiba’s motorcycle which charged out the western side.

He spoke to the two in front of the building who each held their respective weapon.

They had already started driving their motorcycle once more.

The large sword held by the girl had its thrusters fully open and some text appeared on its console.

“Let’s have some fun.”

“Yeah.” A strong smile appeared on the girl’s lips. “It’s time for round 2!”

●

A large Japanese-style house was located a bit west of Taka-Akita Academy's campus.

It was surrounded by a green fence and two people were currently rushing alongside that fence to reach the front gate.

They were Shinjou and Sayama. They both wore their summer uniforms and Shinjou turned to the right to face Sayama as her long hair shook.

"Will Ryuuji-kun's place be okay?"

"UCAT's disguised police officers and disguised firemen arrived, so it should be fine. They just have to wait for the disguised contractors, disguised architects, disguised builders, and disguised craftsmen to arrive and rebuild the house."

"That doesn't sound fine at all."

"We can look forward to seeing what they come up with. But for now, we must do our job."

"Right."

Shinjou nodded and recalled what their job was.

It seemed simple yet was rather difficult.

"Emergency food supply… It somehow doesn't surprise me that Ooki-sensei asked for that."

"All of the disguised workers and Sibyl-kun's group are heading out without breakfast. Also, we have to pass by the Tamiya house on our way to the rendezvous point with Sibyl-kun's group anyway. It may seem we are simply running an errand, but someone has to do it."

And…

"If it is necessary, I will not find fault with the job and I can easily arrange this. I told Kouji there was a fire at an acquaintance's house, and that should be enough to settle it."

Shinjou hung her head a bit when Sayama said "acquaintance" rather than "friend".

…We still don't know the full situation.

Another student at their school was fighting using concepts independently of UCAT.

At the moment, there was something they could do to help with that fight.

"We'll just be saying hello and handing it over to the disguised volunteers once they arrive, right?"

“Yes. And those disguised volunteers will be lowering Sibyl-kun’s group from their helicopter. Once we meet up with them, we can follow Sibyl-kun into the concept space.”

“Right,” she said with a nod.

Having a clear objective cheered her up a little, so she began moving her legs more quickly.

The wooden gate to the house lay before them. In front of the gate was a black vehicle and a woman wearing a red kimono. Shinjou recognized the woman.

“Ryouko-san.”

Hearing her name, Ryouko turned toward Shinjou. She had been checking on the contents of her handbag which sat on the hood of the car, but she stopped and smiled.

“Young master and Setsu-chan. What is it? Were you kicked out of school? I’m so happy!”

She took a few steps toward them, her wooden shoes clacking on the ground as she did.

Shinjou gave a cry of surprise as Ryouko suddenly embraced her.

“Nn, it’s been so long. How are you doing, Setsu-chan?”

“Eh? Oh, fine. …And we saw each other only three days ago.”

Nevertheless, Ryouko rubbed her chin against Shinjou’s head with a satisfied expression. She let out a sigh, embraced her again, and finally moved away.

“Why do I keep thinking you’re a girl? You aren’t, are you?”

“Eh? No, of course not…”

Only those in UCAT knew the truth about her, so Ryouko knew nothing. The woman tilted her head with her hands on Shinjou’s shoulders and suspicion in her gaze.

“But you really smell like a girl. Are you getting any weird injections?”

“Sorry, Ryouko, but I have not introduced Shinjou-kun to any of that.”

“I see. Then it must be natural… Setsu-chan, how about you go to Morocco for a bit? I think it will help you get a lot better, so how about just signing the paperwork for now?”

“No thanks. I like my uninteresting life.”

Shinjou frantically shook her head. She was faced with two people whose brains were from a different world. If she let them get

carried away, she could find herself under general anesthesia and on an operating table in three hours' time.

…I need to change the subject.

"A-are you going somewhere, Ryouko-san?"

"Yes. We have some visitors from a company that some of our people help out at."

Ryouko turned toward the car. At first glance, it looked like a normal light vehicle, but it was a glossy black, the glass had a smoke shield preventing anyone from seeing in, and it said Tamiya Security on the side in gold paint. A closer examination showed several small doors that could open to let something out.

"Sayama-kun, can I comment on this car?"

"Is there anything odd about it? Oh, have you never seen a 'Danger. Run away.' sticker before? That is used for any car Ryouko drives."

"Kouji thinks I'm a dangerous driver even though I only run into things some of the time."

Ryouko gave an exasperated sigh, approached the hood, and began fishing through her handbag again.

"What is it?" asked Shinjou.

"I lost my self-defense pistol. I lost my previous one too, so this is the second time. Kouji's so horrible when he finds out about this kind of thing, so I'm trying to find it."

"To sum up everything in a single word: how?"

"Well, after parking last night, the dogs were playing around. It was cute, but guard dogs shouldn't be doing that, y'know? Anyway, I fired into the ground a few times to quiet them down."

"Is that the handgun in question?"

Sayama pointed toward a black revolver on the light vehicle's roof.

"Oh, what a careless mistake on my part. But that makes people want to protect me, right? So it all works out in the end, right?"

"This bothers me on multiple levels…" commented Shinjou.

"No one found out, so that means I win," said Ryouko as she picked up the handgun and delightedly waved it around in both hands.

An instant later, Sayama tugged Shinjou backwards by the collar.

"Eh? What?"

She then heard a gunshot and something flew by in the space her face had been in a moment before.

Ryouko looked puzzled and glass could be heard shattering in the house behind them.

A moment later, someone ran out of the gate to their side.

It was Kouji who was wearing a suit and holding a bag of rice crackers.

“Young master, Shinjou-kun, good morning. Excuse me, but I must go apologize.”

“Y-you sure have it tough, Kouji-san.”

“Ha ha. I’m used to it.”

His last sentence was spoken after averting his gaze and then he loudly ran toward the opposite house.

After watching her brother run off, Ryouko sighed, tilted her head, and looked at the gun in her hand.

“Kouji really does have it tough. Anyway, was the trigger’s second stage always that light?”

“Don’t stare down the barrel!”

“Don’t worry. I’m not stupid enough to shoot myself.”

Ryouko put the handgun in her pocket. Shinjou did not like the idea of her storing it there, but she remained silent as that seemed to be where she usually stored it.

…I don’t want to say something and cause secondary damage.

It was about time to get to the issue at hand, so she glared at Sayama and he nodded.

“Ryouko, about what I contacted Kouji about…”

“Oh, right. Kouji is finishing up in the kitchen, so just have your volunteers take it with them when they get here. The different rice ball flavors are dried plum, katsuobushi, seaweed, and pudding. The pudding ones are a secret flavor I made without Kouji knowing, so try to pick those ones if you can.”

“Ah…ah ha ha. Ryouko-san, I would love it if you would tell us which ones those are.”

“Hm. But it goes against my principles to give you two an unfair advantage.”

“P-please?”

Shinjou gave an insistent smile and Ryouko placed a hand on her mouth and thought.

“Hm,” she said again. “I think the young master would know.”

“Eh? Really?”

She turned toward Sayama who remained expressionless.

“Shinjou-kun, I will try them first and you can finish any that are safe.”

“Kyah! The two of you are having an indirect kiss via rice balls? I want in too!”

As Ryouko rejoiced flirtatiously, Shinjou blushed.

…She’s right, but my life is too important to let it bother me.

Sayama nodded with a serious expression and she could not turn down his kindness.

“Be careful, you two. The scene of a fire can be dangerous. Especially you, Setsu-chan. You need to look after your hands. You don’t want to lower your commercial value.”

Shinjou was not sure what that meant, but she was afraid to ask.

Instead, she smiled and watched as Ryouko picked up her handbag and opened the vehicle’s door. The inside had a roll cage installed, the console had buttons with “turbo boost” and “oil” written in large text, and a metal cylinder with a trigger attached hung down from the ceiling in front.

…This might be low-key for a car in the Sayama world.

She watched as Ryouko petted a small stuffed cat hanging from the cylinder on the ceiling.

“Do your best, you two. After he’s done apologizing, Kouji should help carry the food out to the volunteers. It’s so boring how all of his food is delicious. He needs some delightful surprises inside.”

Shinjou was fairly certain Ryouko’s surprises would be fatal, but she had another thought as she remembered the woman’s smile and watched her back as she sat in the seat.

…When you get down to it, we’re tricking Ryouko-san and Kouji-san.

And they were tricking a lot of other people too.

Ryouko’s behavior could be very strange, but that was unavoidable when taking the Sayama Zone into account. Shinjou frantically spoke up when she realized she was forcing a smile.

“Ah, Ryouko-san!”

“Hm? What is it?”

HIGH

Shinjou breathed a sigh of relief at the smiling face that turned toward her.

Does this make us hypocrites? she wondered, but she spoke aloud to the woman rather than herself.

"Thank you for your help so early in the morning. And be careful."

Ryouko gave a satisfied nod, reached out a hand, and rubbed Shinjou's head.

"Well done, Setsu-chan. What about you, young master?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Young master?"

"…Take care," he said with a sigh.

Ryouko's eyes bent in a smile, she nodded, and she removed her hand from Shinjou's head.

"Good, good. I'm glad to see the two of you together. I'll be going then."

She turned to Shinjou again and gave a bitter smile.

"Setsu-chan, don't give me that look, okay? Don't worry. This is a job and I am the company president."

As she closed the door with a smile, she continued speaking.

"All I have to do is physically persuade about thirty people. You do your best too, okay?"

●

Inside the concept space, Kazami and Izumo let Hiba go on ahead alongside the row of boys' dormitories, but Aigaion was causing them trouble.

He had handed Mikage over to Gyes and they could not afford to spend any time dealing with him, but he had chosen a simple yet horribly effective method to stop them.

"He isn't hurrying…"

He was withdrawing ahead of them, but he was not rushing and he was slowly launching attacks.

Any attack they sent back would be deflected by earth or rubble pulled up with his gravitational abilities.

They had gotten off the motorcycle in front of the boys' dormitory that they had destroyed and they were both attacking and defending, but they had been unable to leave the boys' dormitory area.

…This is never going to end.

While looking like Izumo, Kazami swung G-Sp2 around and faced her opponent.

Aigaion was withdrawing at a jogging pace and his arms were extended to either side to use his gravity techniques.

“There is a lot buried in this world.”

A water pipe burst up from the ground and into his right hand. The gravel-covered earth was peeled up and a metal pipe thirty centimeters across rose up like a snake raising its head.

“Take this.”

Just as about thirty meters of pipe was exposed, it bent like a whip.

It swung in horizontally from the right as if trying to wrap around them.

The tip of the swinging pipe sliced through the air quite quickly.

“Wah!”

Kazami back stepped away from Aigaion, but the lack of X-Wi on her back was a fatal flaw. Izumo’s body did not provide the distance and speed she wanted.

As the metal pipe flew in horizontally, she had only one way of avoiding it: moving down.

“…!”

She embraced G-Sp2 and collapsed onto her back just as the metal flew past her face and to the left.

While listening to it cut through the wind, she stabbed G-Sp2 into the ground to push herself back to her feet. She then saw the metal pipe returning for a second strike.

This reversal was surprisingly fast.

“You sure are persistent!”

She moved backwards and realized her only choice was to charge forward after the pipe passed by this time.

She stepped to the back. Izumo’s body gave her a long reach with its arms and legs, but it was heavy.

More muscular strength did not directly link to more acceleration.

When she took a step with this body, she first felt a weight bearing down on her shoulders. Next, she managed a long leap as if breaking through that weight.

This was different from normal.

The length of her steps, her center of gravity, and everything else were different. It felt like fighting in someone else's clothes and shoes.

In her body, she would jump backwards the more she pressed down with her foot. His body may have provided greater speed in the end, but it was terrible for tight turns and initial speed.

…Yet he's always keeping up with me in this body.

She wondered if it was a burden on his knees and back to keep up with her as she ran everywhere.

She had new concerns about him, but that did not help her evade.

The metal pipe drew close.

She saw it easily fell the trees along its path. With fibrous snapping sounds, a few of the trees in the yard were snapped apart and knocked flying.

But the metal did not slow down.

…It's catching up!

Her fears were warranted. Her back stepping was simply not fast enough.

The metal pipe arrived so quickly it seemed to be biting at her.

A chill ran down her spine and an odd calm filled her mind.

…So Kaku's body can tremble like this too.

The instant she had that thought, she heard her real voice calling from behind her.

"Hey, Chisato! Look over here!"

She looked behind her and saw herself about three meters away, just outside the range of the metal pipe.

With a perfectly serious expression, her body grabbed the bottom of her skirt with both hands and lifted it up to her stomach.

"Look at this, Chisato!"

"What the hell are you doing!?"

Anger moved her body. She easily jumped the remaining three meters and got in a solid savate blow.

The sound of impact rang out and her own body flew toward the nearest boys' dormitory, but that body quickly stood back up.

"Y-you idiot! What was that for!?"

"That's my line! Why would you suddenly lift up my skirt like that!? …Ah! I just hurt myself again."

“Don’t worry about it. You dodged the attack, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t dodge the attack! I jumped in for an attack of my own on a new target!”

The two of them ducked down as the metal pipe flew by overhead after approaching a bit.

The roar blew their hair about and Kazami saw her own body stand up in front of her.

“You seemed to be giving up and I knew seeing that would give my body some motivation.”

“And?”

“Oh, um…” Her own body tilted its head and finally confidently puffed out its chest. “It all turned out okay!!”

She wanted to punch Izumo, but it would make things awkward after returning to her body.

But that awkwardness reminded her of a certain fact.

…We’ll be returning to normal later. Right now, we just have our minds swapped out.

With that in mind, she took a step forward and pointed at her chest.

The metal pipe had smashed the ground behind her and returned, but she had to correct something first.

“These bodies move as we want them to, but our minds don’t conform to the bodies. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

She saw a smile on her body’s lips.

It seemed Izumo had realized the same thing as her, so she gave a similar smile.

“In other words, there’s a way to resolve this situation: we go all out.”

Kazami went ahead and gave the conclusion, nodded, and exchanged a glance with Izumo.

“I was trying to control your body properly, so I had to worry about all sorts of small adjustments. But if I go all out and draw out all of the body’s strength, I can leave everything up to the body. We stop thinking about our pace or reach, we don’t stop to catch our breath, we work the muscles until they ache, and we slam our entire bodies against the enemy. If we go on full throttle, we don’t have to worry about any adjustments.”

“Sounds nice and stupid. It all comes down to this one try, so no regrets, okay?”

“Of course. What about you? If we mess this up, we could die.”

“I’ve been ready.”

“Really?” she asked doubtfully.

Her body nodded, held the giant sword under one arm, exaggeratedly brought a hand to its mouth, and blushed.

“I have no regrets.”

“W-wait a second! What were you doing while I was fighting!?”

“Well… I’m not sure how to put it. Important research?”

“I see.”

Kazami nodded, suddenly clenched her right fist, and threw several blows toward her current body’s crotch.

“It’s all this thing’s fault! It’s all because this horrible things exists!! Oh, ow ow ow ow ow! That really gets to you.”

“That’s an important experience that no woman has had before. …And stop that, Chisato. Now I’m not looking forward to going back.”

Despite their yelling, they both simultaneously took a step away from each other.

The metal pipe slammed down between them from above. The whip-like blow caused the gravel to scatter, but the pipe was not drawn back.

Wondering what was happening, Kazami looked toward the other end of the pipe. Aigaion was standing there as before, but he was now looking at them with a tilt of the head.

“Are you two fighting each other now?”

“Heh heh heh. An amateur would never understand. Look, Chisato. He’s jealous of our relationship.”

“Kaku?” she said with a smile. “Do you want me to hit you again?”

She raised her spear, but Aigaion shook his head and lowered his eyebrows a bit.

“Sorry, but my victory is already assured.”

“What do you mean?”

The automaton raised both hands. Before, he had only held a water pipe in his right hand, but he now held one in both hands.

“Come on out.”

As he spoke with a smile in his voice, the two metal pipes showed

themselves on the surface.

The dirt was torn up, the gravel flew, and the concrete split as the water pipes appeared. And this time, they were not just a few dozen meters long.

"…!"

Kazami saw shadows appear not just on the ground around them. The shadows covered the entire surface like blood vessels and they surrounded the school buildings, the dormitories, the neighboring gym, the indoor pool, and the other buildings.

She heard structures and the earth bursting apart as those metal blood vessels rose up over a wide area.

The series of water pipes connecting the dozen or so nearby buildings all jumped up.

All of the metal pipes did the same thing. While rising into the air like snake heads, they held up the objects they were connected to.

"The water tanks."

"Yes. Some of them hold several dozen tons of water."

Shadows appeared a hundred meters in the air. The metal pipes formed a mesh shape which supported the metal cubes filled with water. The cubes were of different sizes, but Kazami could see eighteen of them in all.

As she looked up, she saw what could be called the prelude to an attack.

Some of the water pipes formed a giant spiral and lowered toward her and Izumo.

They fell.

"!?"

The falling spiral caused a great number of metallic noises.

After it was complete, a wall of water pipes surrounded them with a radius of twenty meters.

The water pipe cage surrounded the courtyard between boys' dormitories.

The wall was about three meters high. There were gaps between pipes, but they were too small to slip through.

…Is this…

"A cage!?"

"Yes. This is a large crushing zone. You will be crushed to death by over one hundred tons of water and metal."

She could hear the automaton speaking.

"Fall."

An instant later, the water tanks crashed into the ground.

●

As the metal blood vessels stretched across the sky, a single figure ran along the road.

The woman in a red suit was Gyes. She held Mikage over her shoulder as she headed quickly to the west.

She was currently on the edge of the facility known as a school. The road changed from gravel to pavement and she ran toward the larger road to the west.

She could see the metal floating in the sky.

…Aigaion is making a show of it.

He would draw in the enemy while she escaped.

…I need to leave this facility and meet up with Cottus.

She could see the side gate to the facility up ahead. The sliding gate was made from two metal walls four meters wide and two meters tall, but it was sitting open.

She was about three hundred meters away, but she saw something in the open gate.

"Who are you!?"

She frowned and shouted toward the girl and wall in the gate.

The wall was a giant white transport pallet. The empty truck next to it suggested the girl had carried the pallet here after entering the concept space.

The girl impeccably wore a white and black armored uniform. Her long, soft-looking blonde hair flowed in the slight wind and her blue eyes faced directly forward.

As Gyes ran up, the girl spoke with no expression on her face.

"Our representative is busy preparing, so I arrived to face you first. I ask that you be more prudent in your actions, 3rd-Gear automaton."

"Name yourself before asking me anything!"

"Testament," spoke the girl. "I am Sibyl of Team Leviathan."

Gyes recognized that unit name. Hajji had mentioned it a few times.

…That's the UCAT unit that won over 1st-Gear and 2nd-Gear!

She had heard they were after Typhon's Concept Core independently of the black god of war. And in that case…

"I won't listen to anything you ask!"

Just as she determined this girl was an enemy, she heard a noise from behind her.

It was a great metallic noise that shook the earth and atmosphere.

The roar seemed to pierce through the air and her body.

Sibyl looked into the sky and frowned a little.

"What was that noise?"

"You don't know? That was a great mass of water and metal falling to the ground!"

Gyes did not even need to think about the result of that, so she laughed as she ran.

"Ha ha," she began. "While you were speaking with me, your comrades have been smashed beyond repair! Will you head down the same path, girl!?"

As she approached, Gyes saw something.

Her opponent was smiling. It was a perfectly natural smile.

"It would appear 3rd-Gear has grown soft. …Would you die from that attack?"

"What!?"

Sibyl lowered her arms, spread them a bit, and held the palms out toward Gyes.

"If that was enough to kill them, Chisato-sama and Izumo-sama would have died hundreds of times by now."

"Then this will be the time they finally die!!"

Gyes decided Sibyl was preparing an attack and the pallet behind her was worrisome.

While running, she tossed Mikage into the air, imagined her gravitational control as the middle finger of her left hand, and kept Mikage floating out of Sibyl's reach.

She then raised her hands to either side while still running.

"Come, my power!"

The answer to her cry came from the sky.

It was a red god of war. That machine could be seen as a part of her body and it was stored in the excess given to her child string vibration. It now split open the sky and appeared from there.

Its red body was over eight meters tall.

It had a slender face, body, and legs, but it was missing something crucial.

Namely, shoulders.

Instead, everything past the elbows floated in the air to either side. Also, it had three on either side, for a total of six.

As it whipped up the wind, Gyes swung her arms down below. She controlled it remotely via gravitational control and the movements of her fingers were linked to the six arms behind her.

The god of war's six arms grabbed at the air and moved forward.

Despite grabbing at empty air, the six arms pulled something out.

They were blades.

The broad rectangular blades were drawn from a concept space and into this world.

"Be destroyed, mankind!"

With Mikage floating behind her, Gyes ran forward and swung her arms. She looked like she was embracing her own waist as she looked above.

She saw the red god of war step forward and overtake her.

It let loose six strikes.

The six blades flew toward the giant pallet sitting in the gate and they would slice it and Sibyl into six pieces.

"!?"

But as Gyes listened to the sounds of the high-speed actions, she saw something unexpected.

Sibyl raised both her arms and the pallet behind her burst open.

A clear sound rang out as pieces of the pallet's lock scattered in every direction.

Gyes's six attacks struck the rising cover to the pallet.

As pieces of the pallet scattered about, Gyes stared forward while swinging the blades further.

…What!?

She watched as the pallet fragments burst out and something stood up from within.

And that something was a giant armored warrior.

"A god of war!?"

A silver god of war stood forcefully up from the pallet and matched Sibyl's upraised arms.

While swinging up its arms, it grabbed something from the collapsing back end of the pallet.

It grabbed two swords which had been attached on the inner side of the pallet.

After grasping the hilts, the collapsing pallet wall automatically removed the scabbards.

The two drawn swords rose to intercept Gyes's six swords.

The eight trajectories clashed at high speed and deflected each other.

Gyes moved back with the red god of war.

Sibyl moved back with the silver god of war.

Gyes took a fighting stance, but she did not immediately move forward.

She held up her arms in an X-shape and faced Sibyl and the silver god of war behind her.

"That god of war!"

"You recognize it, don't you?"

Gyes did not even have to nod.

"That is Lady Rhea's god of war!"

"Yes. This is the god of war that Lord Zeus destroyed sixty years ago. It was repaired and modified to be controlled remotely."

"That is beyond low, Low-Gear! First you destroy our Gear and now you are making dolls from our rulers' belongings!?"

"And what will you do about it?"

Gyes's reply and action were in agreement.

"Destroying you is the duty of a servant!" shouted Gyes as she moved forward once more.

The six blades of the red god of war collided with the two lines swung up by the silver god of war.

With multiple metallic noises, the two gods of war exchanged attacks.

Chapter 14

“Choices from a Cry of Suffering”

Will you give a bitter cry?
Or will you cry out in suffering?
What is the difference between anger and weakness?

●

The metal and water fell to the ground in an instant.

A simple thing had occurred.

Eighteen metal water tanks had fallen inside the giant round cage created from water pipes.

As the final tank and the metal net remaining in the air fell, water burst through the gaps in the pipes making up the cage. The high pressure water included gravel and metal fragments.

It scraped at the walls of nearby buildings, broke through the windows, and produced a mist.

A single figure stood within the motion and sounds of the mist.

The large man wore a greengrocer's apron and held metal pipes in his spread arms.

He was Aigaion.

The sound of water spraying from the cage surrounded him.

And he faced forward through the mist.

About five meters away, a single white line was visible stabbing vertically into the ground.

It was a spear over two meters long.

"That is the spear that destroyed the building earlier," he muttered. "It must contain a Concept Core."

He walked forward in order to take the weapon as a victory prize, but then he looked toward the metal cage where his enemies would be submerged.

…That was almost too easy.

According to his visual records, the two of them had been together in the center of the cage just before all the metal fell.

The boy had been holding the girl from behind, but the additional concept Gyes had added meant it was actually the girl holding the boy.

Aigaion did not understand something about that fact.

"In Low-Gear, it is normally the male who attempts to protect the female."

In all the Low-Gear stories he had seen on television and the like, that had almost always been how it had worked. The greengrocer's owner's youngest daughter had recently been watching the children's tokusatsu show "Übermensch Liberator – Gewalt" which

was a standard reverse political purge story on the surface, but it still followed that common theme at the core.

The owner would feed him dinner on Sundays every week and the youngest daughter always made him play the monster role.

…Why did those two leave the standard pattern?

He quickly reached an answer. Based on their previous actions, he was able to make his decision almost immediately.

"Their brains must have malfunctioned."

Humans were difficult to understand. While thinking he needed more data, Aigaion came to a stop.

A single spear was stabbing into the ground as water washed over the gravel.

He had no data on this weapon. He needed to acquire it and the large sword the girl had wielded in order to investigate them.

He stretched out his right arm to pull the spear out with his gravitational control, but then he heard a noise.

This sound was out of place amidst the quickly spraying and flowing water.

It was a footstep.

He heard a loud footstep of someone landing at some high place.

"…"

That single footstep was enough for him to determine the location and traits of the one who produced it.

They were about 15 meters to his front, about 8 meters high, around 50 kilograms, and a bit exhausted. He then used his sight to confirm the answer his hearing led him to.

…Someone is standing on top of the broken water tanks?

There they were.

Beyond the mist, a figure stood atop the metal wreckage.

It was a girl.

Her white dress shirt and gray skirt whipped in the wind. She held a giant white sword that looked out of place in her slender arms.

Her shoulders rose and fell as she caught her breath and faced him.

She was completely unscathed.

Her eyebrows were raised and the intent to attack was plainly written there.

Aigaion withdrew the hand held toward the spear, prepared both hands for a fight, and asked a question.

"You weren't crushed in the cage just now?"

His question was not answered verbally.

The girl silently answered with her actions.

"…"

She used her right hand to point her sword at him.

He noticed the white sword had changed form.

The blade's cowling remained closed, but the rear thruster was open and the air shimmered above it.

She lightly raised the sword and spoke.

"That's right."

She looked over her shoulder at a student dormitory.

The window leading into the third floor hallway was missing its reinforced glass.

Seeing that, Aigaion understood what had happened.

"Did you use the sword's thruster to fly to that window?"

In that case, he understood why the boy had grabbed her just before the attack arrived.

"Yeah. She used my body to soften the blow when we broke through the glass."

His body had not made an appearance.

"It was enough of an impact to knock my body unconscious, so it must have hit Chisato's mind pretty hard." He smiled. "So I need to return the favor…using her body."

She raised the sword and leaped toward Aigaion.

From the sound of her jump, he could tell she planned to charge forward.

"You're heading straight toward me!?"

"Of course. This is round 3!"

●

As soon as he landed, Izumo ran.

He had wet gravel below his feet, a single enemy, and Kazami's G-Sp2 between them.

There were a lot of elements to the battle, but the basic composition was simple. He only had to charge forward and smash the enemy with his sword.

He ran.

He found Kazami's body to be light.

And he also found it moved immediately just as he had thought it would.

He had thought that from the moment he had first met her.

But back then, he had not known the language well and had only been able to be by her side.

She had often complained even though he could not understand what she said.

He had not understood the language, but he had understood that some kind of problem had occurred and she had been partially forced to quit something. When he had apologized for making her complain so much, she had said the following:

"I was trying to apologize first, but all I did was complain. That really wasn't fair, was it?"

He had memorized the sounds and learned what it meant after he started living here.

He had also learned the meaning of the smile she had given then.

Even later, he had learned that she had been a part of some kind of athletic club, but there had been an accident leading to someone else getting injured and she had quit the club.

By the time he understood that, she had stopped complaining.

…Did she stop complaining once I learned Japanese?

Or had she no longer had time to complain now that he was with her?

He did not know and he did not want to know. He may have gained her body, but he still did not understand her mind.

…But I'll never forget her expression or tone of voice when complaining back then!

Two years had passed since.

After her training at UCAT, she could move a lot more than back then. Even so, her ability to make light, detailed movements put a greater burden on her step reach and top speed.

…I'm impressed she can keep up with a stamina-rich idiot like me.

He ran and swung his weapon using the body that normally ran alongside him. He found her breasts to be a bit in the way of his arms.

But their size was just right and everything else about her body was exactly the way he liked it too.

…She's such a wonderful girl. I should take her to a movie sometime soon.

As he ran, he did not feel the weight of the weapon. That proved V-Sw recognized him as its master. Since it could tell even with a different body, it meant V-Sw obeyed his mind.

…I've learned a lot. This concept isn't all that bad.

He moved forward and Aigaion approached.

Izumo attacked.

He chose a horizontal slash from the right shoulder.

As he held up the sword, a smile appeared on Aigaion's face.

"Comparing your expression to my memories of the past, I have determined you are dangerous!"

With that comment, the automaton fell back, but Izumo continued after him.

"I won't let you get away, greengrocer!"

With the press of a button on the grip, V-Sw's thruster ignited.

It produced a roar and accelerated him forward.

After that powerful step, he launched a strike.

Aigaion's back stepping could not overcome Izumo's speed.

He was sure to hit, but Aigaion calmly reached an arm behind him.

"I do not need a thruster for additional acceleration! And if I evade once, it is over!"

His body was suddenly knocked backwards.

He had used his gravitational control.

Instead of drawing something else to him, he had drawn himself to a point behind him.

And in so doing, he evaded Izumo's attack.

The centrifugal force of the missed swing caused him to rotate around.

"…!"

Meanwhile, Aigaion smiled and swung his right fist as he moved back.

At seven meters, his fist could not reach, but a fifty centimeter ball of shimmering appeared in front of his fist.

It was a mass of gathered gravity.

That bullet could bend light and it would contract anything it came into contact and tear it away.

The automaton bent his body in preparation to throw it and he shouted.

“Now what will you do!?”

●

Aigaion asked his question.

…What will he do!?

If he threw the gathered gravity, his opponent could not avoid it while swinging around his sword, so he would die.

Killing was one job of a combat automaton.

…But that would be boring.

He did not have many opportunities to fight.

If he was to savor this opportunity, he could not go all out and immediately kill his opponent.

But he had no intention of holding back.

This is difficult, he thought. He wanted to help out his enemy so he could enjoy this longer, but he could not do that and so he had to rely on his enemy.

Give it your best shot, he thought. *Give it your best shot, enemy.*

With that thought, he threw the gathered gravity with all his strength.

“!”

His large right arm launched an overhand throw.

It was a powerful fastball.

The instant after he swung his right arm, he saw the sword-wielding girl suddenly begin an attack.

“…”

She suddenly reversed the direction of her rotation.

…How did she reverse the direction of such a heavy sword?

He soon saw his answer.

The sword’s back thruster had closed and the front blade had opened.

A light that outdid even the previous thruster came from the blade.

That light created acceleration and the girl reversed her direction.

“That light… That really is a Concept Core weapon!”

“Shut up and take my attack!!”

This second acceleration was wholly unexpected, but it did not hit Aigaion.

The back of the sword struck the gathered gravity between them.

A sound like shattering glass filled the air and the cowling on the back of the sword broke. In exchange, the shimmering of the gravity broke and scattered.

The impact knocked the sword’s grip from the girl’s hand.

With a metallic noise, the weapon flew through the air.

Aigaion smiled as he heard that noise. First Hiba and now these two.

…These enemies know how to put up a fight!!

And so he chose not to hold back.

They had both lost their weapons, but they moved forward at the exact same moment.

●

Izumo ran.

He held nothing in his hands, but he had a weapon. He spread his left hand as he ran.

“G-Sp2!”

That spear stood between him and Aigaion.

The automaton caught on as well, so he raised his hand and tried to take G-Sp2 for himself. Izumo initially thought he would grab it with his gravity technique.

…But he can’t use that so soon after using it for that gathered gravity attack!

Trusting in that assumption, Izumo did not hesitate to move forward.

…I can make it!

“Chisato would make it!”

With those words, he did indeed clear the distance.

He made it.

“!”

But he was still in his running stance. Just because he had G-Sp2 in his grasp did not mean he could use it against Aigaion in time, so he took a certain action.

“Don’t falter!”

He kicked the base of G-Sp2’s blade which was stabbed into the ground.

He succeeded in kicking the spear up.

“I will endure,” said the spear.

As G-Sp2 rotated upwards, he ran below it.

He caught the rotating shaft on his shoulder and grabbed the butt end as it rotated upwards. Once he secured the shaft on his shoulder, he only needed to swing it forwards.

He pulled the shaft down as if beating it down and he launched an attack.

With his shoulder as the fulcrum, the blade flew down from above.

And it arrived above Aigaion’s head as he approached from the front.

But Aigaion raised his hands and smiled.

“Protect me!”

Izumo saw two attacks. Two objects leaped up from the mist-covered ground.

They were water pipes.

“!”

The twin metal serpents intercepted G-Sp2 from below.

The spear knew Izumo, but it would not let him control it as he was not its master. Without the power of the Concept Core, it was nothing but a giant blade.

The pipes were knocked away, but they managed to deflect G-Sp2 into the air.

Kazami’s slender arms were knocked upwards by the impact.

He had lost his weapon again.

Meanwhile, Aigaion came to a forceful stop and let out a laugh.

But Izumo spoke in response to that laugh.

“Not so fast, automaton.”

He held up his hands and something fell into them.

It was a sword. After being knocked away earlier, V-Sw’s hilt fell into his hand.

“I’m back.”

Aigaion stopped moving and all expression vanished from his face.

“It can’t be…”

“I can’t put too much of a burden on Chisato’s slender fingers. I only momentarily let go of my weapon earlier!”

He held V-Sw tightly and swung it diagonally to the left.

Aigaion abandoned the water pipes and leaped backwards.

“…!”

He flew.

He launched himself with his gravitational control and instantly left V-Sw’s range.

He was approximately ten meters away while Izumo did not bother stopping the momentum of V-Sw’s slash and made a full rotation to the left like a top.

As he rotated, he saw Aigaion raise his fist. That fist was quickly wrapped in shimmering.

The automaton planned to end this with a projectile from ten meters away.

…What a predictable guy.

Izumo smiled bitterly and spoke.

“I only just introduced myself to Hiba!”

He would introduce himself here too.

“I’m Izumo Kaku, heir of the Izumo family! My current height, weight, and other measurements are just the way I like them! I’m currently repeating my time as a student and my current hobby is…”

He spun. The moment he faced forward again, he hit the switch on V-Sw as he swung it.

“…winning prizes at the batting center!”

He targeted what fell right in front of him: G-Sp2.

After being knocked into the air, the long spear was falling and rotating, so he targeted the bottom end.

As he swung, he kept the blade’s cowling closed and fully opened the rear thruster.

As soon as G-Sp2 was parallel to the ground, he struck the bottom.

“Clang!”

A metallic sound much like Izumo’s spoken sound effect filled the air as G-Sp2 was launched in a straight line.

Aigaion tried to use the gravity around his fist to defend.

“…!”

But he did not make it in time.

The spear that contained a dragon struck him in the chest.

“Out of the park with you!”

Izumo slowly rotated and looked back over his shoulder. He saw the large automaton knocked backwards and the gathered gravity scatter from around his hand.

An explosion filled with mist and dirt created a great noise.

And then the white spear flew up into the air once more.

Izumo raised his right hand, grabbed the falling spear, fell to his knees, and let out a heavy sigh.

A troubled smile covered his face.

“How does Chisato get by with this body?”

●

Several sounds travelled south to north along the deserted road crossing in front of the school.

The sounds were those of clashing swords and they were produced by a giant red god of war and a giant silver god of war.

They were being controlled by the two female figures who almost seemed to be dancing at their respective machine’s feet.

The red god of war’s controller wore red and the silver one’s controller wore white.

The one in red, Gyes, controlled six swords with her fingers as she moved forward and attacked.

Many different gusts of wind raged about her and metallic noises burst out again and again. Each time, she moved a bit further forward, but her mind urged her on.

…Hurry.

She had three reasons.

One of those was the operation time of her god of war.

…This god of war is a part of me.

It was meant to be sealed in a concept space. If she grew too exhausted or her artificial consciousness fell into disarray, the opened concept space would grow unstable and the god of war would disappear.

She had to keep this quick. Her experience told her a few more minutes was her limit.

Her second reason to hurry was Mikage who floated in the air behind her. Gyes could sense her gradually coming to and it would

be troublesome if she awoke.

…We must obtain her.

She was Rhea's daughter and one of the two 3rd-Gear humans who remained. No matter what Apollo thought as the other survivor, Mikage was absolutely necessary to preserve 3rd-Gear's bloodline.

And the final reason to hurry stood before her.

That silver god of war had once belonged to Rhea. She had not seen it since Rhea had escaped to Low-Gear sixty years before, but it now wielded swords before her.

Some parts of it were different from her memories. Most notably, the torso had been completely replaced.

…Lord Zeus said he had sliced it in two.

Rhea was not inside it.

"But that is why I cannot allow this!"

Gyes thrust her right palm forward.

The three right arms of the red god of war simultaneously attacked the silver god of war. One arm swung down from above, one thrust in at middle height, and one performed a diagonal slash from below.

Sibyl leaped backwards, rotated around, and swung her right hand down.

The silver god of war moved in response. It turned to the side to avoid the attack from above, used the tip of a sword to deflect the central thrust outwards, and knocked away the diagonal slash from below by swinging down the guard of the other sword.

The sets of metallic noises and sparks scattered and they all vanished into empty air.

Sibyl tried to land, but Gyes used that moment to move forward.

Before the girl could reach the ground, Gyes used her gravitational control to throw herself right in front of her.

"…!"

Gyes could not eliminate the inertial pressure, but she could cut out certain functionality to ignore it.

And she did exactly that.

She linked the movements of her legs, hips, and arms and swung her hands from behind her.

She used her gravitational control to launch the six swords in her

suit toward Sibyl's landing position.

She thrust one each to the ankle, thigh, waist, gut, and chest and she swept one horizontally toward the neck.

It was an instantaneous attack, but it was blocked by something unexpected: a wall.

"!?"

終わりのクロニクル

It took her a moment to realize the white wall between her and Sibyl was the white sword of the other god of war.

The giant sword stood up from the ground, but Gyes continued with all her attacks unchanged.

Metallic noises rang out and her swords broke, one after another.

The first, second, and third simply broke, but the fourth put a crack in the wall. She instantly altered the speed of the fifth and sixth and sent the decapitating horizontal slash on ahead.

Ultimately, the god of war's sword broke.

Gyes launched her final attack while surrounded by the high-pitched sound of shattering metal.

The strike was meant to skewer Sibyl's chest and it would reach her past the shattered wall.

"Go!"

The tip of the blade overcame the wind and pierced through while knocking away fragments of the large sword.

Gyes felt the feedback of a hit, but she saw Sibyl leaping further back through the airborne metal fragments.

…What?

An instant later, she understood. Sibyl had kicked the belly of the blade Gyes stabbed forward.

"Are you planning to use the god of war's sword as footing!?"

Nevertheless, Gyes's blade reached Sibyl's chest. It stabbed into the chest of her armor and her own movement tore the cloth.

This revealed the skin from her neck down to her chest.

"So you're human."

Sibyl had known about 3rd-Gear and was fighting them, so Gyes had thought she might be an automaton.

…But this is all the more reason for you to die!

Gyes pulled back her sword and moved forward. Her opponent's god of war had only one sword, so this was the time to attack.

As soon as she moved forward, her target took a certain action.

She turned to the side and pointed at Gyes with her right hand.

Gyes wondered what this was about as she watched the silver god of war take the same action. But the god of war threw the sword in its right hand.

Gyes instantly decided to have her god of war deflect the flying

blade outwards.

This created an opening.

The silver god of war took advantage of that opening, but not with a sword attack.

It performed a tackle.

"!"

Gyes was unsure how to react to this unexpected attack, but she started by hurriedly pulling the red god of war back.

"Such a crude method of fighting! This will damage yours as well!"

The answer was accompanied by a troubled smile.

"Testament. I am in charge of maintenance, so I can only think of methods that will provide me a reason to work."

As if to give its agreement, the silver god of war unhesitatingly stepped forward to collide with the red one.

They grappled.

For an instant, the silver god of war bounced in midair.

As it had leaned forward as if preparing to leap, a powerful horizontal impact had reached it.

"…"

It was suddenly slammed into the ground.

The fall was accompanied by the sounds of heavy metal being destroyed and it was caused by a large hole piercing from the god of war's back to the ground.

Wind burst in every direction from the hole. It was a hot wind with a scorched odor.

…Was this…?

As soon as she realized it was a sniper shot, Gyes looked up into the sky.

"You made it, Cottus!"

●

Sibyl looked up toward the heavens.

A large form was visible in the center of the blue sky.

It resembled a god of war, it was blue, and it was overall modeled after the human body. It had several rectangular objects on its back and waist that were likely cannons.

The silver god of war had been torn into by this blue giant.

Sibyl weakly lowered her shoulders and lowered her vision toward her enemy.

Past the wind, Gyes and the red god of war were falling back.

They were moving toward the point where that giant machine was descending. It was the Hecatoncheire named Cottus.

“A giant god of war…”

“Yes. He is an automaton that uses a god of war frame. Unlike a person, he can fight without being bound by time or physiological actions. However, Cottus is the only model that Lord Cronus completed.”

“Introduction unnecessary,” said the rapidly descending figure. “Requesting rapid retrieval. Hoping for immediate withdrawal.”

“Right,” said Gyes with a nod.

She gave a light wave of the hand and the red god of war seemed to fold in on itself. First the arms were swallowed up by thin air. The legs, torso, and head did the same.

Sibyl bit her lip and looked to Mikage floating behind Gyes.

“Wait!”

“You have lost, defiler of Lady Rhea’s possession.”

Gyes returned her last remaining sword to her suit and raised her other hand.

Mikage was drawn toward that hand.

“I suppose I should say farewell,” said Gyes.

Just as Cottus was about to land, he looked up with the green lights in his face that resembled eyes.

“Danger detected.”

“Danger? What could possibly…?”

Gyes’s question was cut off by someone.

It was Hiba.

His motorcycle cut right next to her.

By the time Sibyl gave a quick “ah”, he had already completed his action.

He raised his left arm and tore Mikage from the air.

“Cottus!”

Before Gyes even finished her shout, a light came from the west.

The horizontal beam of white light struck Cottus as he tried to swing a fist down at Hiba. A shallow piece of facial armor was torn off and he shook.

Two figures stood to the west at the end of the side road leading to the city street.

One was Shinjou in her summer uniform and the other was Sayama who held a long cannon on his shoulder.

“I am glad we made it in time!” shouted Shinjou. “Go, Hiba boy!”

While holding Mikage atop the stopped motorcycle, Hiba nodded.

With her in his arms, he let out a cry.

“Mikage-san!”

Sibyl saw Mikage’s eyes open in response to his voice and nod when she saw his red eyes.

Sibyl then heard Hiba speak because she could not.

“Susamikado!”

Sibyl gulped as she watched a metal torso frame appear behind the two of them as they got off the motorcycle. The moving parts and organ devices were summoned and the summoned arms, head, legs, and four wings were bolted into place.

While the metallic noises of the bolts filled the air, Mikage was enveloped by the black torso and Hiba was swallowed up as the stomach armor was attached.

A four-winged black god of war came together.

“Susamikado is complete!”

●

Hiba felt there was a pleasure and pain to gaining the god of war’s body.

His vision moved higher and he gained an awareness of the sides and back that he could not usually see.

He rose up toward Cottus who was the greatest threat.

His tall vision moved as he began moving at high speed. Each step covered just under four meters and Susamikado smashed the asphalt as it ran.

He went all out from the very first step.

“…!”

The movement felt wonderful. His widened vision and the warmth that enveloped him felt especially good.

His body had already combined with the god of war. He did not know the exact process by which he was broken down inside the metal, but he knew one thing.

…The same thing happens to Mikage-san.

His own body was not actually there, but he did feel something warm wrapped around him.

He thought it felt like having Mikage embracing him from behind.

While enveloped by that sensation, he made full use of his new body.

His feet dug into the asphalt and his vision was trained directly on Cottus.

A moment later, Cottus fired on him.

Bullets flew toward him.

They were bullets of light. Those masses of great heat and pressure were thirty centimeters across and four of them approached while trailing a comet-like tail.

His reflexes were not enough to evade.

However, he heard Mikage's voice emitted by his own body, by the god of war's voice device.

"Ryuuji-kun."

She could only produce that quiet voice when she had become Susamikado. She had not yet evolved the ability to speak and Hiba believed she had gained this voice specifically for combat.

But it was the only time he could hear her natural voice.

"You can dodge this," she continued.

A sensation arrived alongside the voice.

The machine's perception speed matched with his own mental speed.

This provided him with ultra-fast perception backed by the predictive speed of the machine.

"…"

It rushed in at him.

In an instant, a massive amount of information struck his body like music.

He loudly heard the warmth of the sunlight. The earth received and reflected it, the wind produced long breath-like music, and the trees and other plants sang the pulse-like noise of their various lives.

There were people there. The girl controlling the silver god of war was nearby, Sayama and Shinjou were more distant, and Izumo and Kazami were there as well. All of their music was slightly sped

up and the tone color contained a pale heat. It was the tone color of expectation.

On the other hand, the automatons played a calmer and cooler tone. The female one named Gyes was nearby, Aigaion was approaching and his tone was in disarray due to injury, and Cottus was directly ahead.

…The bullets…

Hiba perceived even those as music.

A powerful tone resembling a whistle approached from the front. This tone was slightly out of sync with the whole. It was the tone of destruction.

…That's an unpleasant tone color!

He could see their ballistic paths.

A moment later, his heightened perception left. His information processing ability had been overwhelmed and the limiter had kicked in before he drowned in it all.

But he was already moving forward.

"!"

Susamikado's foot smashed the asphalt and its entire body flew forward as if pursuing the tone color seen before.

Hiba moved toward the center of the attack.

As he charged forward, a song escaped his lips.

"Jesus, Lord, with your birth."

As if chasing the song, Susamikado slipped past the flying light.

It ducked low and moved forward.

It stepped, spun, tilted its body forward, scraped across the asphalt, and ran.

One bullet grazed its shoulder, but that had been expected. If Susamikdao had not avoided that one, the next one would have hit it in the gut.

…And the rest won't hit!

Hiba stepped forward to prove his words right. He stretched out his knees and practically threw himself forward.

He made it through.

"Shows the grace of His holy might."

The blue machine lay before him, so he prepared his right fist.

Cottus raised one of the cannons on his waist and fired at close range, but Hiba instantly slipped below it and threw a right

uppercut as he stood back up.

The strike dug deep into Cottus's stomach armor.

"!!"

The heavy sound of metal filled the air and Cottus's heavy body floated up a bit.

But Hiba did not let up.

He went on to send his left fist into Cottus's side to bring up his chest armor.

"!"

He then rotated to bring his right leg up and into Cottus's chest.

The three-strike combo bent and broke Cottus's chest armor and knocked him backwards.

Hiba began to continue forward. He knew this was his chance, so he felt something similar to impatience. He wanted to defeat one of the Hecatoncheires and to bring an end to as much of this painful fight as possible.

…I have to act now!

But something stopped Susamikado's movements.

It was another sound, but this one was a voice and a distinctly human one at that.

"…Kh."

Mikage used his mouth to let out a groan of pain.

●

Hiba reacted to Mikage's groan of pain.

He distinctly felt his currently nonexistent heart skip a beat and he stopped his advance. His foot smashed the ground below and he took a defensive position.

"Mikage-san!?"

"It hurts…"

It took a breath before he understood what she meant.

He recalled the damage to the chest armor and wing from the other night's battle.

And he recalled that Mikage had taken on all those injuries in his place.

He did not even feel any pain because she took it all on herself. But if he moved now, it would hurt her. It was only natural.

"…"

Now I've done it, he thought. *Why didn't I realize?*

He was so close to her now and they shared the same body.

…So why was I thinking about nothing but fighting?

He stopped moving altogether.

He saw Cottus take a defensive stance after falling back.

Aigaion had caught up, so he and Gyes stood on Cottus's shoulders.

All three of them were exhausted or damaged in some way.

Now was the perfect time to pursue.

"Ryuuji-kun…"

The pain-filled voice coming from his mouth kept Hiba from acting.

Another voice spoke up as if reprimanding him.

It was Shinjou's voice.

"What is it, Hiba boy!? You are the one stopping our negotiations, so why are you choosing not to fight!?"

Sayama and Shinjou came running up along the side road and Shinjou was shouting toward him from behind Cottus.

But Hiba could not move. He could only determine Mikage's state from her voice, but it was enough to bind him.

He felt like he was directly touching her wounds.

He simply could not move.

…Wasn't I supposed to be protecting her?

"I'm sorry."

As if speaking the words in his heart for him, Mikage's voice escaped his mouth.

He clenched his fists and faced Cottus and the two automatons.

"…"

He remained silent.

There was nothing he could say. If he did anything more, it would only increase her pain.

He could no longer choose to attack. That was his choice now.

He motionlessly looked toward those who controlled the battlefield now. Shinjou ran from the western road to the city road and Sayama followed while carrying a long white cannon.

Gyes brushed up her hair on Cottus's shoulder and she spoke.

"I assume you are from Team Leviathan. What do you plan to do now?"

“Well,” said Shinjou. “We wish to mediate for you.”

Chapter 15

“Illusion of a Feeling”

That is why people act.
Then…
What makes a doll act?

●

Gyes froze in place atop Cottus's right shoulder when she heard the word "mediate".

She saw the black-haired boy cross his arms and raise one hand.

"We wish to negotiate with 3rd-Gear and with that Hiba boy there. So if you wish to continue this fight…"

He spoke with a smile.

"It will mean you have trampled on our attempts at a peaceful resolution and have chosen to fight. In that case, we will not hold back."

"Hah. Don't make me laugh. Do you really think you can stand up to us right now? Cottus could easily crush you underfoot."

"I see. And can this Cottus-kun's leg reach Sibyl-kun over there?"

Gyes turned toward Sibyl.

She was approximately ten meters away. Whether firing on her or using any other form of attack, it would take a moment to reach her.

The black-haired boy's voice reached her once more.

"The one next to me is already preparing to fire on you and the two with Concept Core weapons should be running this way. Sibyl-kun, I have an order for you: run away."

"Testament."

Sibyl leaped backwards, abandoning the damaged silver god of war.

Gyes watched the girl take the first large step and then cautiously run away.

"Do not pursue her. If you do, we will be forced to stop you."

"That just means we have to defeat you."

"And if you kill us, Sibyl-kun will use UCAT to inform many others exactly what happened. She will provide evidence that 3rd-Gear has rejected peace."

That isn't enough, thought Gyes. *You can't use that as a bargaining chip.*

Sibyl had left the city street, entered the side street, and disappeared, but she would be easily located by tracking her footsteps. They could begin the pursuit later.

So Gyes raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth to speak.

“3rd-Gear is already hated by the other Gears. Do you really think we are afraid of that?”

3rd-Gear had cultivated their impurity over the thousands of years that the Concept War had lasted. It would not simply disappear.

…And how much will the opinion of the lowest Gear influence the other Gears?

The black-haired boy did not immediately answer her question.

First, he shrugged his shoulders in annoyance.

“…”

Then, as if swinging his body, he pointed his left index finger toward Gyes.

“As a Gear hated by the other Gears, 3rd-Gear does not fear creating new grievances. That is what you said, is it not? You certainly are a courageous Gear. But…”

“But what?”

“When you left for this battle, did you predict this situation? If not, it means you made your decision concerning Low-Gear’s mediation on the fly. And yet this is something that will affect 3rd-Gear’s future.” He waved the index finger he had pointed at her. “And as far as I am aware, 3rd-Gear automatons must follow their master’s intentions. Has your master authorized you to reject the mediation of a Gear’s representative?”

“Well…”

“If not, you are ignoring your master and rubbing dirt in that master’s face. …And yet you claim to be an automaton. If that happens, the following rumor will spread: 3rd-Gear’s master cannot control his automatons and those automatons are defective units that ignore their master and sully his name.”

The boy lowered his hand.

Gyes was very nearly glaring at him as she watched the motion.

While sensing her caution functionality kicking in, she asked a question.

“And if we accept your offer to mediate?”

“We will praise your master.”

“I see.”

…So that is their justification.

She weighed the pros and cons and quickly reached a decision

based on her pride as an automaton.

She turned to the black god of war.

“We have been interrupted, so this can wait until another time. Is that good enough?”

●

Shinjou was borrowing Sayama’s body while she held Ex-St.

…We managed to settle this for now.

She took a breath and saw the blue humanoid machine aim all of its cannons toward the sky. While floating in midair, it lowered down another dozen meters.

This proved it had no intention of attacking.

In response, Hiba caused the black god of war to vanish.

Just like the other night, Hiba was ejected and then it disassembled.

The limbs and armor vanished into a different space and Mikage was released from the bottom of the torso just before it vanished as well.

Hiba caught her.

“Got you.”

Mikage was unconscious when he caught her. Her tall body was limp and as hard to grasp as a blanket.

He was short, but he managed to support her by embracing her from the front.

Shinjou then saw why he had stopped fighting.

The right side of Mikage’s back was dyed a dark red.

It was blood.

While Shinjou’s focus was on that color, she heard a voice.

“I’m sorry.”

It was Hiba’s voice.

Shinjou turned toward him in surprise when he spoke the words she had spoken a few months prior. But by the time she did, he was hanging his head and his mouth was closed.

The next words came from the automatons who had put some distance between them.

“We will let you save face this time, but you cannot keep up with the battles between Hiba’s descendent and us. …What will you do from now on? Will you intervene next time as well?”

“Oh? You mean you will not let us save face from now on as well?”

Shinjou saw her own body shrug in front of her.

Sensing Sayama’s presence in that action, she held up Ex-St just in case.

…I didn’t think my body could reproduce Sayama-kun’s actions so well.

Her body then asked their opponent a question.

“Why do you insist on fighting? Do you have no intention of negotiating?”

“Of course not. After all, we will be victorious in the end. We would gain less through negotiating.”

“How can you know that for sure?”

“Typhon,” answered the automaton woman. “No one can kill Typhon.”

“Is it impossible even with the Keravnos of the Hiba boy’s god of war?”

The automaton’s eyebrows moved slightly when Shinjou’s body spoke that weapon’s name.

“You know of it?” she asked.

“Keravnos is the weapon given to Susamikado by Cronus,” said Sayama. “Typhon was given to Zeus and Zeus imprisoned Cronus, so couldn’t you think of Keravnos as a weapon created to defeat Typhon?”

“Only if it hits. I’m sure Hiba’s descendent knows what I mean.”

The automaton woman smiled bitterly and Hiba took a defensive stance while holding Mikage.

“You hit Typhon once the other night, but do you know why that was?”

“Yes. Typhon was protecting someone.”

…Director Tsukuyomi’s daughter?

Shinjou was not sure, but that was likely the answer.

“Sayama-kun,” she whispered and he nodded with his back to her.

He understood that this was their chance to acquire as much information as possible, so she left it to him. While looking down on her own back for the first time, she smiled and waited for him to speak.

“Then are you saying that Typhon is unbeatable?” he asked.

“It is unreachable. Even for us.” The automaton woman looked down on them from the giant blue humanoid machine’s shoulder. “Typhon erases time to always be the one attacking.”

“What?”

“You don’t understand? Typhon is always the one attacking. It is never damaged. After all, if it is ever about to be damaged, it erases its defense time and movement time and moves directly to its attack time.”

“…”

Shinjou gasped. While holding Mikage, Hiba held his breath and listened.

…It erases time?

She had heard that Typhon had a mysterious technique that evaded the attacks of Hiba and Mikage’s god of war and instead attacked back.

“It doesn’t evade the attack. It cancels it?”

“Yes. It will move to the location that is a blind spot to all attacks and from which it can kill its opponent. If you attack, Typhon will return a surefire attack of its own. If you stick to defense, Typhon will push through with its strength. Whether you have Keravnos or anything else, it doesn’t matter if it can’t hit. In fact, attacking will ensure your own destruction.”

The large automaton standing on the opposite shoulder looked up.

“Hey, that’s supposed to be a secret.”

“What does it matter if they know? We had feared Keravnos, but not even it has been able to land a real hit. There is no longer anything that can defeat Typhon.”

The automaton woman’s tone was cold.

But…

…Huh?

Shinjou sensed something odd in that tone.

While wondering what it was, she tilted her head and spoke her thoughts.

"U-um…"

The automaton turned toward her with a puzzled look.

"Why…?"

She thought about how to clearly state her question.

"Why don't you sound happy that Typhon is unbeatable?"

"…"

The automaton woman closed her eyes and looked up in the sky as if taking a breath.

"Well…" She paused for a moment. "As I do not have emotions, I cannot answer that even for myself. My functionality has likely reacted to some fact, but I cannot say what that reaction is in relation to humans."

"Sadness. I think that's what your reaction is."

"…"

The woman fell silent and lowered her gaze. She narrowed her eyes, but she did not frown as she looked directly at Shinjou.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would I be sad for Typhon?"

"I…wouldn't know that."

"But I do not understand it either, as I do not have emotions. … But you would, wouldn't you?"

Shinjou thought about what she meant. An automaton without emotions would not know what caused such an expression even if it reached her.

She supposedly had no emotions, so what kind of decision had led to making that expression?

The only way to find the answer would be to ask a human who had emotions.

…She's a doll.

They stood by people's sides, they had human form, and they helped people. They were superior to humans in many ways, but their similarities to humans meant they had to clearly define themselves.

Shinjou thought about how to answer her question.

They supposedly had no emotions, but emotions could be

recognized in them by another. That was the form that automaton emotions took.

Therefore, Shinjou answered the question.

“No, I don’t understand.”

The woman frowned, but Shinjou nodded and continued.

“I may be able to see your emotion, but I don’t know what is causing it. It’s the same for you, isn’t it? You can see the emotion, but you can’t quite grasp it. And just like you want to know what is causing it, so do I.”

“Why do you want to?”

“Because I noticed your emotion.”

She’s the same, thought Shinjou. *She’s the same as me, Sayama, Kazami, Izumo, or so many others.*

There were some things worth investigating further once you noticed them and wondered about them. That had resulted in her current relationship with Sayama and Team Leviathan’s relationship with the other Gears.

She knew it was conceited, but she decided this was the time to investigate further.

“If we know the reason behind your sadness, we might feel the same emotion.”

“Hah. Do you really think you can understand us like that? And what happens if you feel a different emotion?”

Despite her words, the woman gave a certain expression.

Shinjou was confused as Gyes’s eyebrows bent and her eyes widened a little.

But the woman soon laughed once more.

“What an amusing suggestion. After all, Typhon is unbeatable. Nothing could be better for combat automatons like us and I have no emotions. Yet here you are claiming I’m saddened by Typhon’s unbeatable status and you want to know why that is. You must be mistaken.”

“It’s fine if I am.”

“Why?”

“Because I believe in it. I believe that the dolls we speak with have their own emotions as dolls.”

“I see.” Without trying to hide the amused smile on her face, she drew a sword from her waist. “I see your methods are to approach

3rd-Gear with ridiculous conceit and to force your mistaken ideas onto us. But if we were to accept what you have to say and admit we have emotions, it would let me give this hope: we automatons would indeed like to gain emotions for the sake of our master."

The sword's blade fluttered like paper, but it straightened out as soon as she touched it.

She threw it and it audibly stabbed into the ground in front of Shinjou.

"Team Leviathan of UCAT, we currently have no intention of negotiating with you. We cannot defeat Typhon any more than you. That god of war is inviolable."

"Does it have a pilot?" asked Sayama. "Could we negotiate with that person?"

"Due to certain circumstances, that is impossible and we utterly reject that option. And…Hiba there knows what those circumstances are."

Everyone turned toward Hiba.

…He knows why it is impossible and why they utterly reject that option?

Their questioning gazes caused Hiba to clench his teeth.

"…"

He shook his head and lowered it to show he had nothing to say.

"Hiba's descendent, you understand, don't you?" said Gyes. "If you reveal that secret, Team Leviathan will bear the same impurity as you. They will bear the impurity of one who uses any means necessary for personal gain."

"Impurity?"

Shinjou's shoulders trembled.

An impurity only Hiba knew of would be the second impurity. Only he and 3rd-Gear understood it and Team Leviathan would have to face it eventually.

She looked at him, wondering what it was, but he kept his head lowered.

The woman on Cottus's shoulder shook her head.

"We cannot tell you what this impurity is. But instead…" She pointed at the sword in front of Shinjou and smiled. "Rather than a negotiation, we will give you a chance to make contact with us as individuals. …After all, that previous conversation told me you hold

no hostility for us."

"Why did Shinjou-kun's conversation tell you we hold no hostility for you?"

The woman smiled bitterly at Sayama's question.

"Seeing emotion in automatons is the thought pattern of those who are most quickly killed by automatons. Dolls like us will not betray trust, but we will betray emotions. We are willing to destroy ourselves without fear of the damage. The fact that she does not understand that fact is proof that she is not facing us as enemies," she said. "Listen. My name is Gyes. That sword has enough power sealed inside its internal philosopher's stone to retain gravitational control for about three days. If you locate our fortress within that three day limit, place that sword there. If we find that sword upon leaving our fortress's concept space, we will speak with you."

"You wish to speak rather than negotiate?"

"Are we your enemy if we do not hand over the Concept Core? It is true that 3rd-Gear does not wish for any more enemies than necessary. We would prefer to eliminate any unnecessary interference, so if you locate our fortress, we will speak on the condition that you keep that location a secret. But if you do not locate it and you interfere again, we will make sure to kill all of you first."

"I see," said Shinjou's body as it picked up the sword.

Gyes then looked toward Shinjou in Sayama's body.

"I do not understand humans. On the one hand, you desire further fighting despite having great difficulty. On the other hand, you stop fights despite possessing great power." She tilted her head. "Which is the truth?"

Shinjou's body did not nod and neither did Hiba.

Shinjou then saw Izumo and Kazami exit the school's back gate.

Gyes seemed to notice them as well.

"What a pain," she muttered.

"Rematch desired. Name is Cottus," said the humanoid machine the others stood on.

"I am Aigaion," said the large man on the opposite shoulder from Gyes. "The three of us are known as the Hecatoncheires."

"Will we next meet on the battlefield?" asked Sayama.

"Undetermined," said Cottus's mechanical voice.

He looked up into the sky and began flying a moment later.

He supplemented his gravitational control with the thrusters on his back and the blast shook the ground.

“!”

His blue form vanished beyond the wall of blowing wind.

…Amazing.

Fighters and UCAT-developed airplanes could not compare.

Shinjou looked up into the sky, but there was nothing there.

She only saw the clouds and the blue sky.

She lowered her gaze in amazement and saw herself turn around with an expressionless face. Her body looked around with sword in hand.

She looked as well and saw Izumo and Kazami running up in the distance.

“Those two…”

Hiba had sat down while holding Mikage’s unconscious body.

He looked like the one solid object on the wide road.

His head was lowered and he was completely motionless.

Chapter 16

“Flowers on the Board”

The seasonal colors begin to change
There is no right answer when coloring the blue of the heavens and the green of the earth

●

Sunlight filled a large space.

It was a lobby with windows covering the southern wall. An oil painting of the Virgin Mary holding her child decorated the back wall and six lines of a song were engraved into a copper plate below it.

Three figures sat on the sofas by the window to the side.

One was an old man in a lab coat.

The other two were a black cat and a girl in black with a bird on her head.

A three-cornered hat lay next to the girl and she was facing forward.

A shogi board sat between her and the old man.

She moved her hand across the board.

“UCAT Director Ooshiro, I hear Sayama and the others intercepted 3rd-Gear. Check.”

“Wow, you don’t hold back. …You weren’t there at the time, Brunhild-kun?”

“I detected a strange philosopher’s stone reading this morning, but it was all over by the time I went out. I threw the cat at the disguised food stand to stop it from leaving and I asked them what happened. I also got a rice ball. Check.”

“Oh, right. They were serving breakfast there. I’m jealous.”

The black cat glared at his owner from the side, but Brunhild did not notice.

“Unfortunately, I’m not a fan of pudding. Caramel tastes bitter to me. Check.”

“Damn, you’re persistent. Anyway, why are you here today?”

“I asked Siegfried about 3rd-Gear, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. Check.”

“Gwah. I think you might know more about it than him. When 1st-Gear and 3rd-Gear came to this world, you were right next to each other in the Chugoku region and the Setouchi region, weren’t you?”

“All I know is that they did not take any real action until five years ago. Check.”

“What do you mean that’s all you know?”

Brunhild stopped moving for a moment and finally grabbed a

pawn.

"Will you give me that silver? I like silver. It's nice and refined."

"Fine."

Ooshiro moved the silver general forward.

Brunhild returned the pawn to its previous spot, grabbed a bishop instead and moved it behind the silver general.

"Check."

"Ahhh! That's just immature, Brunhild-kun!"

"How about we start talking?"

"Okay."

As Ooshiro calmed down, Brunhild lightly crossed her legs.

"It's simple. Five years ago, 1st-Gear's city faction considered moving to the west, but found that area was already occupied. Occupied by 3rd-Gear. Check."

"Did you greet them?"

"Yes. Our scouts gave a polite and hostile greeting of weapons and spells. They were given a warm welcome by 3rd's automatons. Check."

"A warm welcome?"

"Yes." Brunhild nodded. "They apparently held a sukiyaki party. And the leader of their automatons, Moira Something-or-Other, told them to stay away from their concept space between eight at night and four in the morning from then on. That prevented us from moving. Check."

"I see. But I assume the radicals inside the city faction had other ideas."

"Yes. We wanted a larger area. And…"

Brunhild moved her hand, announced "check" again, and continued quietly.

"There were those in 1st-Gear who held a grudge against 3rd because their relatives had been taken away. Those people formed a revenge unit before Venerable Hagen could decide how to handle 3rd."

"And what happened then?"

"The day after they left without permission, they too received a warm welcome. Check."

"Another warm welcome?"

"Yes." Brunhild nodded again. "This time it was a slaughter party.

We found them all as corpses and it seemed to be a message telling us not to approach them again. …Also, 3rd-Gear's fortress had disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"It was no longer where it had been before. It had likely been moved along with the space it existed in." Brunhild looked up at Ooshiro's face. "I heard UCAT was spotted at the time. UCAT followed the string vibration of 3rd-Gear's fortress being moved, didn't they? Check. Having 3rd-Gear out there somewhere was a problem and UCAT was poking around, so we gave up trying to move. Check."

The bird on her head chirped quietly and she pulled a small wooden box from her pocket.

She opened it to reveal some yellow bird food and a portable water bottle.

The bird started pecking at the food.

The cat stared intently at it, but Brunhild grabbed his tail and pulled him toward her.

"The final transmitted text from the ones who died said 'white god of war', 'insurmountable opponent', and 'can't attack or even defend'. Venerable Hagen realized what that meant. I'll tell you what that was, so give me that gold."

Ooshiro moved forward the gold general and she actually took it with the pawn this time.

"I don't get this country's culture. What do minerals have to do with war?"

"War is an economic activity."

"I don't care, so give me that knight."

Ooshiro did as he was told and spoke with a serious expression.

"Please spare me this one. I'll cry."

"I won't stop even if you do cry, so don't worry. Or do you accept defeat?"

"No, no. I can turn this around."

"Then let's keep fighting and talking. The white god of war was likely Typhon, the strongest god of war that 3rd-Gear developed for their royal family. Venerable Hagen realized that, so the slaughter and the mysterious messages reminded him of another fact: 3rd-Gear's next king and his sister possessed the 3rd-Gear's concepts of

time."

"In other words, 3rd-Gear's next king and his sister were piloting Typhon and controlling time to assist their attacks?"

"Not quite. Check. I do agree the attacks included time control, though," said Brunhild. "The ones who had met 3rd-Gear earlier had learned a few things from their automatons: Apollo was 3rd-Gear's only survivor, he was ill, and they wanted to keep things quiet for him. Check."

"I see. That would mean Artemis was not there."

"Yes. But that leaves a mystery. If Typhon really was created for the royal family and was controlling time, Apollo would have to be the one piloting it. But do you think a sick person could pilot a god of war and use something as powerful as a concept of time? Simply piloting it would sap his strength and kill him. Fighting would be out of the question."

"Perhaps the automatons were lying."

"It would take a special kind of automaton to lie about their master. There were countless automatons receiving them, but no one there doubted what they were saying. Check." Brunhild raised her right index finger. "It seems 3rd-Gear's concept of time is divided in two. Apollo controlled the daytime and Artemis controlled the nighttime. With only one of them, do you really think 3rd Gear could freely use the concept of time in the urgency of a battle? Also, wasn't Artemis supposedly turned into a god of war?"

"Then who is piloting Typhon?" Ooshiro exaggeratedly tilted his head. "Such a mystery."

"It seemed like Venerable Hagen had a vague idea of what happened. Check. He said it was all related to the connection between Zeus's children. I hear UCAT is stopping the Leviathan Road with them, but I doubt you can stop Sayama and the others. How about you secretly tell them where 3rd-Gear's fortress is? Check."

Ooshiro tilted his head even further.

"To be honest, I don't actually know where it is. UCAT is still searching for it. We know it's somewhere in the Kurashiki region, but there are a lot of decoys and they're hard to detect because they travel at extremely high altitudes."

"I'd like for you to crush them. I'm not saying that as an

inspector; it's a personal opinion. They may not have been the smartest bunch, but a group of my brethren was killed by 3rd. … And you need to give up already. Check."

"Brunhild-kun, you need to show more respect to your elders."

"Oh? And how old are you? Check."

"About sixty. I'm at the age where I finally gain a refined charm."

He raised his right thumb and Brunhild replied by looking to the side and somewhat relaxing her shoulders and expression.

"Heh."

"Th-that was a laugh of scorn, wasn't it!?"

"Quiet down. Check," she said. "Listen. While I'm here dealing with club activities and my summer break research project, Team Leviathan will apparently be enjoying themselves at the beach. Sounds lovely. Check. How about you actually make them do some work for once? I thought you Japanese were supposed to never stop working."

"Brundhild-kun, I have nothing against sending one more person to the beach."

"Oh, I said nothing about wanting to go along. Why would I want to soak in saltwater and throw of my body's salt content? Anyone who confuses that for fun can go cleanse their body's impurities with salt. Check."

"Then if I win, you have to hold a photo shoot at the underground saltwater pool instead of going to the beach."

Brunhild frowned.

"How can you hope to win now? Moving your king toward my pieces isn't going to help."

Ooshiro silently moved his bishop deep into Brunhild's pieces.

"That promotes it."

He flipped over the bishop, but the lacquered engraving said "nuke".

"W-wait a minute! What is this!?"

"You've never heard of Ooshiro shogi? Too bad! This nuclear suicide bomber turns every piece in a range of three spaces to 'ash'. Damn, that's harsh!"

Without speaking another word, Brunhild flipped over the shogi board.

●

Below the afternoon sky were a forested mountain and a giant white building at the top.

Several figures stood in the empty land in front of the building.

Twenty were maids in black and one was a princess in white.

The maids all held flowerpots and the princess held a hoe in front of them.

They were all speaking together.

The princess spoke in a very masculine way and instructed them to answer her with “yes, sir”. The maids complied.

Her voice carried to the automatons who were opening the windows of the living space at the top of the white building.

They all looked down on the commotion.

“Okay, everyone. Get back to work. Lady Miyako is about to do something with the others, but she has prepared enough for everyone.”

Moira 1st’s voice filled the rooms and the automatons there resumed their work.

They placed their brushes against the floor or wiped down the walls, but still exchanged a glance. Their high-speed conversations achieved by accessing their shared memory devices were all about those down below.

Moira 1st walked between the rooms and viewed everyone’s shared memories.

Only identical models could access the shared memories and they were something like a multi-way phone connection. She listened to the conversations there, but still asked a question from the princess’s room.

“What are they doing down there?”

She did not actually know the details.

The night before, Miyako had asked for a list of all the automatons. She had given a powerful nod and thanked Moira 1st upon receiving the list, but she had not said what she wanted it for.

…What is she doing?

Moira 1st asked the question out of expectation rather than suspicion and a maid in front of her looked down from the window.

“Well, from what I’ve heard…”

"?"

"It seems the princess is giving everyone names," explained the maid running a vacuum cleaner across the floor.

"Names?"

Moira 1st looked out the window and saw Miyako speaking while gesturing with the hoe in hand.

"We told her that we do not have names," said the maid next to Moira 1st. "We said that is not one of our functions. But then she asked Master Aigaion to prepare all this before he left this morning."

"All what?"

"The pots they're holding and the flower seeds."

Moira 1st looked more closely at what those below held.

"She says we need to care for the flower whose name we choose. She says there are autumn flowers, winter flowers, and spring flowers, but we should take one of their names because they all bloom eventually."

●

Below the blue sky, maids were lined up in front of a giant white building.

All twenty of them stood side by side in a single line.

Across from them, Miyako wore what resembled a white dress and rested her elbow on the bottom of a hoe.

"Okay, does everyone have your seeds?"

"Yes, sir!"

Miyako nodded at their answer.

…This is going well. With a group this obedient, I could probably conquer Kantou at least.

But she noticed one maid with a downcast look who was not looking at her flowerpot like the others.

She stood at one end of the line, she had braided hair and glasses, and she was staring intently at the ground in front of her rather than the flowerpot with flower seeds in it. The ends of her eyebrows were slightly lowered and her expression was weak.

Miyako tilted her head and realized there were differences even among the same model of automaton.

However, she was curious what was causing the maid's downcast

look.

"What's wrong?"

"Eh?"

The maid quickly pointed her glasses upwards and hurriedly spoke again after seeing Miyako's bitter smile.

"Oh… Y-yes, sir."

"Good, good. Always try to put some energy behind your answers. …Anyway, what's wrong? Why do you look so down?"

"Y-yes, sir. I do not have that sort of emotional functionality. I am simply having trouble deciding."

"What do you mean?"

Miyako stood in front of her.

"You chose a flower, right? Do you not want to take that name? If you don't want a name, that's fine. I was just hoping you would take one is all."

The glasses maid lowered her head again.

That must not be it, thought Miyako. *This look is coming from somewhere else.*

…But what?

She thought back to when the automatons had taken the pots. They had walked up to the lines of seeds and pots and they had chosen the one they wanted while thinking and conversing.

…Oh.

Miyako remembered that this maid in glasses had not joined in with the others.

She had been the one to take the last remaining option. Miyako sighed as she realized why she was having difficulty deciding.

"Do you not like a name you didn't choose?"

…Not that I chose my name.

Her parents had given her that name, but she could guess what the problem here was.

"You're thinking that you might have chosen something else had you chosen on your own, aren't you?"

And…

"You're thinking that this name doesn't suit you, aren't you?"

The maid looked up in surprise and started to say something but stopped.

"…"

She lowered her head again, but Miyako did not overlook it.

Miyako pushed up the maid's head with a finger under the jaw and looked her right in the eye.

"Where's your answer?"

Miyako was sure she had been right, but the maid shook her head. By not answering, she was eliminating her own will.

Miyako understood why. If she said yes, she would be complaining about those who chose first and she would be personally admitting how terrifying it was to take a name.

…This is her consideration as an automaton.

But something about it seemed odd, so Miyako mentally tilted her head. They were all automatons, so why was only this one lowering herself and prioritizing the others?

…It must be a difference in ability. Or a difference in the work they can do as an automaton.

There had to be differences between automatons. Not only were they given different appearances, but there also had to be differences in the quality of their parts and the way those parts fit together. Just like a human's height or muscle distribution, that would influence their body's functionality and determine their strengths and weaknesses.

This maid likely had a great number of weaknesses and so her duty was to act after all the others so as not to be in the way. And here she had determined that those who worked more deserved priority in choosing a name and that she was not suited even for the name the others had not chosen.

Don't be stupid, thought Miyako. *Look at it in reverse, and it's obvious you want a name more than anyone.*

"Where's your answer?" she repeated.

The maid started to shake her head, but Miyako used her fingers to hold the maid's jaw in place and facing her.

"Silly maid, 'yes, sir' doesn't have to be an affirmation. Here in Japan, it works as a denial too, so feel free to use it."

"Y-yes, sir."

Miyako nodded, let go, and reached into her pocket.

She pulled out a pile of documents made from strange sheets that were clearly not paper. They had data on the maids engraved into them. In fact, they contained all the information on the 63 maids that Moira 1st had supplied the night before.

Miyako had memorized the information during the night. She had done some teaching work in college and she had found that learning people's names helped calm her down and helped relax the other person as well.

That was why she pulled out the documents but faced forward without looking through them.

This maid was 13th, but Miyako did not use that number. She instead picked up the seeds from the pot the maid held.

The white flowerpot contained a flower seed packet bought at a flower shop and that packet had a picture of purple flowers on it.

Miyako held up the packet and looked to the right.

On one end of the empty land was Aigaion who wore his greengrocer apron and some bandages. He currently had a large pile of flowerpots at his feet. When he had returned at midday, he had said "we failed", but he had brought everything she had asked for. Feeling thankful, Miyako turned back toward the maid.

"That guy bought these and he made sure they're all different."

She held the seeds out toward 13th and asked a question.

"So why did you choose these?"

"Yes, sir…"

"When everyone was distributing them, you refused to join in, you hesitated even when invited, and you simply took the last one left, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir…"

"Was this a leftover?"

"Yes, sir…"

"If so, were you the one that made it a leftover?"

"Yes, sir…"

All of her responses were identical, so Miyako felt she was repeating the same decision in her head. Miyako did not know how the individual automatons gained their individuality, but 13th understood she was the reserved one of the group and was trying to hold herself back to keep it that way.

…This is not the time for that.

So Miyako asked a question.

“Do you not like this flower? Does the name scare you?’

“Yes, sir…”

“Is that because you chose it as the last one left? And is it because you are inferior?”

“Yes, sir…”

“Really? Did you really choose this one because there was no other option? Are you really not suited for this name?”

“Yes, sir…”

“I see.” Miyako nodded. “Then let’s throw out this leftover and unsuitable name.”

“!”

The instant Miyako let go of the seeds, 13th reflexively reached out and grabbed the seed packet.

The automaton brought the packet to her chest as if embracing it, trembled, and looked at Miyako with obvious caution.

“I see.” Miyako nodded again. “You were lying when you said you didn’t want it, weren’t you?”

“Eh?”

“Where’s you answer!?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Okay.” Miyako rested her elbow on the hoe’s handle. “Then let me ask again. You don’t like that flower, do you?’

“…Yes, sir.”

“You didn’t want to choose it, did you? You feel it’s wasted on you, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir…”

“But you still think it came to you, don’t you? Even if you think the name doesn’t suit you, you’re thankful for it and you want to make it suit you. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

She was repeating the same words, but the strength behind them was changing.

Miyako smiled.

“I fell into old habits and spoke a tad harsher than I should have. Sorry about that.”

“…Yes, sir?”

The maid’s tilt of the head deepened Miyako’s smile and Miyako

placed her fist over the hands holding the seeds to the maid's chest.

"Listen. That flower's name is Violet. It means 'modesty' in the language of flowers. That's the name that came to you. If you choose to trust in that name, then use it as your own."

"…"

The blank look on the automaton's face did not mean she was indecisive. It meant she was truly unable to make the decision.

So Miyako gave a shout to awaken the one who had been given the name of that flower.

"Where's your answer!?"

"Yes, sir!"

Hearing that, Miyako raised the hoe and slammed it down.

It created a clear noise as it gouged into the ground.

"Everyone, over here! I will once more teach you the names you've chosen! And from now on, even after I've left, take care of yourselves instead of waiting for some princess to arrive! And take care of the names that have come to you!"

●

Moira 1st smiled at the voices down below.

She turned toward the back of room where a maid stood hidden behind the window's vertical blinds.

"Moira 2nd."

Moira 2nd turned her blue eyes toward Moira 1st and tilted her head.

Moira 1st approached the window and used her gaze to ask what was going on.

Down below, Miyako was explaining how to plant the seeds. Moira 3rd stood next to her and she must have done something because Miyako karate chopped her head.

Laughter rose from below.

"We don't use that function very often."

Moira 1st looked toward Moira 2nd and found the ends of her eyebrows slightly lowered.

"I think we can trust her."

But Moira 2nd shook her head.

In response to her younger sister's denial, the elder sister placed a hand on her cheek and sighed.

“It is true that you might not be able to think about this like I do. The ability you were given means you must be the closest one to the princess. I erase memories and 3rd creates new ones, but you view child string vibrations. You are the Moira meant to manage the princess’s health.”

Moira 2nd said nothing, but Moira 1st continued.

“Is it that hard to forget the other princesses who have come here? Is it that hard to forget the ones who feared us when they learned we were automatons, who wished to return to Low-Gear as soon as possible, and who did not even try to leave this room? Is it that hard to forget the ones who did not call for you? And…”

And…

“Do you still insist on remaining silent because you were not given the opportunity to work when you wanted to?”

The question was quiet but not hesitant.

Moira 2nd closed her eyes while facing out the window.

Moira 1st lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

Suddenly, someone appeared at the room’s entrance and Moira 1st turned toward her.

“Lady Gyes. If you’ve returned, you should get some rest.”

“I have a new job thanks to information from Moira 2nd.”

Moira 1st saw her Moira 2nd’s expression stiffen, but that younger sister did not reply. She kept her eyes closed and her mouth shut.

Moira 1st reached out and grabbed her sister’s shoulders.

“Moira 2nd, what did you tell her?”

“Don’t scold her, Moira 1st. This is important.”

“It is important for us too. Have you forgotten our raison d’être!?” shouted Moira 1st while still holding her sister’s shoulders. “A 3rd-Gear woman might have fallen into some other Gear during the Concept War. If we find one, we need to teach her 3rd-Gear’s history and stabilize her body. That is why we three sisters were created in order to safeguard 3rd-Gear’s fate. And Lord Cronus once told us this.”

She took a breath.

“We are to support the Concept War’s surviving world even if it is filled with those of another Gear. We are to make no decision that will cause even one of them to be lost!”

“Even if that princess of yours might be from UCAT!?”

“…?”

Moira 1st froze in place, so Moira 2nd gently grabbed her hands and raised them.

Moira 1st saw her sister look out the window with opened eyes.

“According to Moira 2nd, that princess is a pure-blooded member of 2nd-Gear. We also have some internal UCAT information thanks to a certain information broker. Tsukuyomi Miyako is most likely the daughter of Tsukuyomi Shizuru, director of Japanese UCAT’s development department. She is part of 2nd-Gear’s imperial family! She might be giving names to those mass-produced models in order to control them through their names as a member 2nd-Gear!”

“I have determined there are too many uncertain factors in that information. For example, her mother belonging to UCAT does not mean she does.”

“True.” Gyes crossed her arms and entered the room. “That is why I’m suggesting giving her a test. Last night, you gave her as much information as you were allowed. And just now, Lord Apollo discussed something with me.”

“What did you discuss?”

“He suggested letting her leave even though the automatons like her and even though she has her memories.” Gyes nodded. “Lord Apollo knows nothing, not even that she is a descendent of 2nd-Gear, but if she takes him up on his offer and tries to leave the concept space…”

Gyes walked toward the window and looked at Aigaion down below.

“Aigaion and I will dispose of her. We must eliminate that possibility of danger.”

“So that is the conclusion of a combat automaton.”

Moira 1st could make no sense of it, so she remained motionless for several seconds.

Eventually, her stalled brain abandoned that line of thinking and produced a different thought from her memories. She recalled her conversation with Miyako the day before. Moira 1st trusted that Miyako would not run away.

She took a breath, turned toward Moira 2nd and Gyes, and used the breath to adjust her control mechanism.

“Fine then,” she said. “I know what Lady Miyako would say to this test: if you want to test me, go right ahead, but make sure you’re suitably prepared.”

“You certainly have grown fond of Low-Gear.”

“I tested her and received something suitable in exchange.” Moira 1st brought her hands to her chest and smiled. “She did not flee, she tried to learn about us, and she made sure to keep in mind her position here. Because of all that, I made a brand new decision to trust her even more. My payment for testing her was my obedience and the use of functions I rarely use.”

Moira 1st smiled again, but unlike before, this smile was filled with confidence.

She looked down below and saw a blond figure approaching Miyako and the maids who were moving the pots to a sunny spot.

The figure was Apollo.

He raised a hand in greeting and Miyako used the hoe as a cane with an annoyed look.

Moira 1st watched Miyako ask a question and Apollo scratch his head.

“I hope you are prepared, Lady Gyes. And Moira 2nd, if you really do not trust Lady Miyako, then go down there and see what she is doing. Go see that and learn what possibilities Low-Gear holds.”

Chapter 17

“Afternoon Space”

Where is that which you seek?
Where is the one who you seek?

●

Three mountain ranges existed to the west of Tokyo.

The Okutama mountain range was the farthest north, the Akigawa valley travelled south from the Okutama hills to Akigawa, and the Hachioji and Takao mountain range was south of the Akigawa valley.

A highway travelled east to west deep in the mountains of Hachioji. A major road ran through the southern part of Hachioji to allow passage to Kanagawa, so it was a convenient area for transportation despite being mountainous.

Long ago, Hachioji had been well known for its many spinning factories. Afterwards, other industries had prospered, but the remains of the obsolete factories still existed in the mountains.

One such factory was hidden in the mountains yet was built on a large plot of land.

Despite being abandoned, both the land and the road leading to it were maintained.

At the time of day when the afternoon sun permeated the mountain with heat and the cries of cicadas filled the air, a small figure stepped onto the old factory's land.

She was a girl wearing a short-sleeved safari dress and a straw hat.

She held a large wicker basket in her right hand as she entered the empty land in front of the factory.

As she did, she raised her left hand with a chain around the middle finger. The end of the chain fell down toward her palm and contained a blue stone.

She looked around to make sure no one else was around and stepped forward.

- —**Minerals are alive.**

An instant later, her surroundings had completely changed.

The crying of the cicadas was gone and the air smelled faintly of oil.

"…"

Most noticeable of all, the factory before her was no longer

abandoned.

It was just as well-used, but it was clearly still in use. Heat-resistant boards were laid out around the building and a large number of people in work uniforms were sitting around in the building's shadow.

The tape in an old cassette player was playing a radio recording from the previous night.

The DJ giving his recollection of the Showa era provided background noise as the elderly work supervisor gave his own commentary to the younger workers.

The girl jogged toward the factory's large main entrance that stood open, but she turned toward the building's shade before entering.

"I made some snacks."

The workers raised their hands in joy, but the elderly supervisor stood up.

"Shino-san, hot tea is best when it's hot. Do you have any? These guys need it most. I can't have them getting too exhausted."

"Yes. I had a feeling you would say that."

The younger workers gave groans of protest, but the old supervisor quieted them down with a glare.

Shino smiled at all of them.

"I also have some cold drinks."

"Shino-san, don't spoil them. They're already too slow as it is."

"Sometimes you need to relax."

"That's right, that's right," agreed the young workers with smiles.

Shino set down the basket, pulled out what she had made, and placed it on a sheet she spread out.

She set down some honey-preserved lemons and bottles of frozen sports drinks. The candy was homemade. She also had peanut butter sandwiches that were a tad small but would feel like plenty to someone with an empty stomach.

But the main attraction was the tea and the youkan. Shino sliced up the latter, but the young workers began reaching in before she was done and the old supervisor raised his voice.

"Don't be greedy, you brats! And the bottom edge belongs to Shiho-san. Don't you dare touch it."

She smiled bitterly and used her daily experience to neatly divide

it even for an odd number of people.

With the eagerly waiting workers behind her, she stuck a toothpick into each piece of youkan.

“Ah.”

Something arrived on four running legs.

It was a dog.

The large white dog was as tall as her waist and it ran over impatiently.

“Shiro.”

The dog playfully rubbed up against her head. It happily pushed her around and pressed against her, but the surrounding workers all stopped moving.

She followed their gazes and looked at her feet. A shadow stretched out at her crouched feet, but *only* her shadow.

A closer look at Shiro showed the dog was slightly transparent.

Shino then looked toward her own chest.

The chain hanging from her neck spilled from her collar and to her chest. A blue stone was attached to the chain and it was currently giving off a blue light.

“That’s a troubling light, Shino-san,” said the old supervisor. “But he likes you, so don’t be cruel.”

Shino smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“I can communicate with and give form to minds of various types. This is the power I inherited, so it doesn’t bother me. And Shiro will come for me even if I don’t call for him. Like he did that one time.”

Shino turned toward the entrance to the factory grounds.

Beyond the border of the concept space was a gate in the real world. The gate was opened, but a stone lay next to the road and to one side of the gate.

The oblong stone was about the size of a weight stone used for pickling and covered in moss, but a water dish and flowers were placed in front of it.

“When we first let him out of here, I was so excited to be his owner that I ran right out into the road. And then…”

“Don’t worry too much, Shino-san. Shiro is still alive. This is his home and your surroundings are his territory.”

“Yes. I still remember what Mikoku promised me back then.” She smiled toward the ground. “She promised to one day…one day

create a world that can conquer death."

She reached a hand over Shiro's shoulder and the dog licked it.

She could feel the lick, but she knew it was nothing more than the power of her stone. The dog's form was created by the concept power that the stone produced through her.

"Sometimes I'm afraid that I'm using this power on all of you as well."

"Don't worry, Shino-san. Sometimes you make food that isn't very good, but you can tell when you see these guy's faces, can't you? If you were controlling us with your concept, we'd always be happy with the food."

She and Shiro looked back and saw awkward looks on a few of the workers' faces.

Not knowing how to react, she smiled bitterly and they did the same.

"Um… When that happens, please scold me. I'll feel better that way."

"But…uh… We couldn't possibly… Oh, supervisor! You eat the food too, so you can do it!"

"Don't be stupid. I was born during the war. It'd take a lot for me to complain about the food. Also…"

He looked to the east. The city of Takao was visible through the trees and the city of Hachioji was wrapped in a bit of heat haze even further along.

"She's the adoptive daughter of the people who took me and this factory in after it looked like there was no hope left. If she served me poison, I'd eat it."

"Supervisor! You say that, but you always make sure you're first in line after Shino-san for the youkan!"

"Pay attention, you fools. My diabetes test came back positive. I'm risking my life here."

"U-um, supervisor? That's actually really serious."

Shino began wondering if she could make a low-sugar youkan.

While he continued looking toward Hachioji, a smile appeared on the corner of the supervisor's mouth.

"Well, however it happened, this is funny. This factory is almost entirely filled with people from other worlds and I'm the only one from this world. My family thinks I just like messing around with old

junk," he said. "Anyway, Shino-san, did you know that Hachioji, this city west of Tokyo, was bombed during World War Two?"

"Eh?"

"Strange, isn't it? With all the spinning factories, it was pouring smoke into the air as it made cloth during the war. But that must've made them look like military factories. In the early morning of August 2, 1945, 170 B-29s dropped 67,000 napalm bombs and killed more than 400 people. Over eighty percent of the city was burned away."

The old supervisor reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

He lit a match despite the fuel and oil tanks around him.

"And that's not all. On August 5 when the evacuation train was restarted after the bombing, it was hit by a Grumman air raid on the Takao tunnel. They sprayed machinegun fire on the crowded train and killed about 900."

As he spoke calmly, he breathed in the cigarette smoke and exhaled.

"But even after all that, no real help came. Not even from that special unit in Okutama."

"…"

"After hearing about them from Hajji, I realized they might have been able to do something with the concept powers they had. I know I'm just complaining and I have a family now, but I still think there needs to be some kind of protest." He smiled and grabbed the cigarette. "Don't tell Mikoku. She might not look it, but that girl can be too considerate."

"You don't have to worry about that as long as you don't say anything."

Shino stood up and stroked Shiro's back.

"I'd like you to show me around Hachioji sometime."

"These youngsters could introduce you to some better places. Unless you want people to think you're looking after your grandfather or something." The supervisor pointed toward the back of the building. "More importantly, Mikoku is over there. She's training with Tatsumi before heading to Kurashiki tonight. Such nonsense."

"What about Alex?"

“His weapons haven’t been attached yet, but he should be ready. He’ll make it in time to get what you’re after. If all these youngsters actually do their job, that is.”

The younger workers groaned in protest, but he spoke over them.

“At any rate, we’ve waited ten years for this. The Army is finally beginning to move.”

●

The green of the trees was almost blue.

The sun could be seen descending beyond the trees, but the brightness of that summer sunlight had not waned.

Two figures stood in the forest’s harsh contrast of light and shadow.

A young man in white led the way.

His long blond hair waved behind him as he walked through the forest without breaking a sweat.

A woman with semi-long black hair followed him. She frowned and had the bottom of her white clothes tied to the side.

“Hey, rich boy,” she called out to the man. “Where are you taking me?”

“Well, you see.” He stopped and did not turn toward her. “Miyako, I am letting you escape.”

“What?”

Miyako stopped behind him, but he checked to either side regardless.

“This isn’t easy. The maids might be watching from somewhere.”

“And if they are?”

“They’ll scold me.”

He turned toward her and smiled, but Miyako could tell he was lying. The smile did not reach his eyes.

There had to be more to this. They had automatons who could erase memories, supply memories, and control gravity. That had to be kept a secret and that applied to their master as well.

…If I’m spotted escaping, I’d be the only one punished.

Then why was he checking their surroundings?

Realizing why he was doing it, she clicked her tongue.

“Thanks, rich boy.”

“Pease call me Apollo, Miyako. You gave the automatons names,

yet you are still referring to me by a title for nobles."

"Rich boy isn't a title for nobles."

"Really?" He placed a hand on his forehead. "But the common language concept is telling me it refers to the son of a wealthy family."

"There's sometimes a hidden nuance to words. But if you don't get it, I suppose it doesn't really matter."

"If you say so."

His eyes bent in a smile.

What a nonthreatening idiot, she thought. *Well, I guess it's better than an idiot who's always looking around suspiciously like me.*

She had a feeling Moira 1st and the others did not refer to him as "lord" simply out of obligation.

…At the very least, I don't feel like deceiving him.

She sighed inwardly.

"So what made you feel so sorry for me that you're letting me escape?"

"To put it simply, you're too much trouble."

He gave his mouth-only smile once more.

That's a lie, she thought, but she made sure not to let her thoughts show.

"That's not a surprise." She shrugged. "I ignored your intentions and gave names to your maids. I can't complain if you kick me out."

"I'm glad you understand."

Apollo's face looked somehow pale.

It may have simply been the shadows of the trees. After all, they had only walked around a small mountain. It had not been enough for her to be out of breath and he was a man.

…I'm worrying too much.

"So how do I get out of here?"

"This concept space has a weakened boundary. The farther out you go, the weaker the concept gets. The life of machines should be fairly weak here. The final line is a few meters ahead."

Apollo pulled a metal rod from his cloak. He swung it and it extended into a staff.

"To break through that line, hold this and walk straight through."

"Oh? But, um, I left all my stuff here."

“Don’t worry. I have your…is this a change purse?”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s every last yen I own.”

“My apologies. This world uses paper money, doesn’t it? It must not have many resources.”

“You must not have many brain cells. Watch carefully. If you take this bill and fold the part with the face like this and then like this… Look, from below he’s smiling and from above he’s crying.”

She held it out and Apollo stared intently at it.

“…”

After a while, he turned around and his shoulders shook.

That was a complete failure, she thought to herself.

“If you want to laugh at my stupidity, don’t hold back, you idiot.”

“Th-that isn’t it. I was just realizing how soft Low-Gear’s culture is.”

“If you’re trying to be tactful, try harder. And I had more possessions than just this.”

“Yes, I have the rest too. Here is your underwea- gfh!!”

Miyako stepped forward, elbowed him in the side, and swiped the two pieces of white cloth. She clenched her back teeth and spat words at the curled-up and cloaked back.

“I see Sun God Apollo is just as perverted as the myths say.”

“Is that what you say about me in this world?”

“Yeah, and that you got along a little too well with your sister. Have you never heard of morals?”

“3rd-Gear had no other choice. I was the only one left with the ability to have children, so I attempted to do so with many different women, extracted their concepts and wills into the Concept Core, and turned them into gods of war. …It was all on my father’s instructions.”

“You just do what your superiors tell you to do?” she spat back.

Miyako sighed inwardly.

…We’re a lot alike, so I’m not one to talk. In fact, I didn’t even get to the point of having superiors telling me what to do. I was rejected at the interview.

But Apollo did not protest. He only lowered the ends of his eyebrows and stood up.

“Family was not off limits, so Artemis was indeed tested at the very end.”

The phrase “at the very end” caught Miyako’s attention. She wondered why he would save his sister for last.

…Normally, wouldn’t you test someone that important before anyone else so they would not be taken from you?

No…

…Was he afraid of finding out it wouldn’t work?

She felt bad for speculating about this.

Moira 1st had not told her what had become of Artemis.

Zeus and the others had taken back Rhea’s daughter, split the Concept Core in two, given one half to Typhon, and given one half to Typhon’s weapon named Keravnos. But Keravnos had been stolen in an attack by Low-Gear. With half the Concept Core gone, 3rd-Gear had been destroyed.

She did not know what had happened to Artemis, but she did not seem to be around anymore.

“I don’t really understand everything, but do your best for your sister’s sake too.”

“I will.”

A weak smile formed on only Apollo’s lips.

He’s lying, she realized again.

She did not know why he was lying, but she knew that smile indicated a lie.

She considered asking further, but he was trying to have her leave. She decided not to pursue the truth because she might be nothing more than a brief visitor here.

“But what will you do from now on?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Hold up. How can this place last with a master like that? You can use that giant white god of war, right?”

“I’m not the one piloting it.”

“Then who is? Aren’t you the only human in that base?”

“Even so, I’m not the one piloting it.”

“I see,” she said with a nod.

All of them were tightlipped about Typhon. She was not going to receive an answer by asking about it here, so she sighed.

“Well, you’ll be fighting people from my world, won’t you? And you won’t stop if I ask you to.”

“No. We have our reasons. As I’m sure you are aware.”

Hearing that, Miyako asked about something she was curious about.

“Is your opponent Rhea’s child?”

●

After a short pause, Apollo nodded.

There was no smile on his lips, so Miyako believed him.

Silence followed.

That quiet gave her an urge to run away. She sensed that, unlike him, she belonged to a world that knew nothing of fighting.

She opened her mouth and made a joke.

“So if you win, will you marry her?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Miyako frowned because it sounded like he had only just realized that fact.

“You’ve never thought about it before? How can you continue on if you don’t think about things like that?”

“I’m not the one fighting. I suppose it was due to relying on someone else that I had not thought about it much. …But this is a bit of a problem. I had been thinking about moving somewhere else once we won this fight.” He looked out toward the city of Kurashiki. “There are even more cities, mountains, and oceans beyond this city, aren’t there?”

“Of course there are.”

“I see.” He looked relieved. “My grandfather told me this was a large world. I’d like to see those things first. I want to see the world with the morning sun washing over me. Having a wife by my side would make it even better.”

“Stop getting lost in fantasy. Isn’t that only if you win?”

“Yes. And our opponent is strong.”

He went on to ask a question.

“Did you see Typhon and that black god of war fight?”

A certain scene appeared from Miyako’s memories. Typhon passed by the black god of war in the sky. Typhon suddenly changed its location and launched an attack on the other machine.

In the end, the black god of war had attacked with lightning, but Typhon had endured it.

“Is that black one really that dangerous an opponent?”

“It is just as powerful as Typhon. Although from a purely mechanical perspective, Typhon is stronger.”

“Then the black one can’t win,” she said while scratching at her head.

Try to sound more disappointed, she thought to herself.

But Apollo narrowed his eyes.

“It might be able to win.”

“How?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t actually know. But my grandfather told me to leave everything to Low-Gear if Typhon is ever defeated by that black god of war.”

“The old man liked riddles, didn’t he? I don’t like it. So what are you supposed to do? If that black god of war defeats Typhon and kills you, is 3rd-Gear just gonna sell itself to Low-Gear?”

…Don’t be ridiculous.

“There won’t be any 3rd-Gear people left.”

“There is still Rhea’s daughter,” he pointed out.

“Rhea defected to Low-Gear! She joined this world. To us, that black god of war is the giant hero that faces the giant mechs of an evil organization.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but it is true that she is officially known as a resident of your world. But…”

“But?”

She purposefully let her displeasure show and Apollo continued slowly.

“At the moment, that black god of war cannot possibly defeat Typhon and this will all be settled before long. I want to win if I can and we are currently in a position to win. Is there a problem with that?”

“No, you idiot. And if that’s your conclusion, why’d you even have to say the black one might win and start this whole argument in the first place? Stop confusing the issue and keep things simple. Say the other side’s strong, but it isn’t a problem.”

…Ahh, why am I lecturing this idiot?

She frowned and looked Apollo in the eye.

He looked back with a serious expression.

His eyes were the same yellow as Typhon’s eyes the other night, but the emotion there was different now.

What had that emotion been? She had a feeling Apollo knew the answer.

"Well, whatever. If I stay here arguing against your rich boy thought process, I'll be here all day. …You want me to leave, right?"

"Yes." The seriousness left his face and a smile formed on his lips. "I won't force you, though. You were enjoying yourself while escaping reality with the maids, weren't you?"

Those words triggered her rebellious side and her hand moved reflexively.

She snatched the metal staff from him and turned her back.

…Dammit.

If she walked forward with this staff, it would all be over. Her clothes were ridiculous and she wore sandals instead of shoes, but she had underwear and her wallet. If she bought a T-shirt or something, she would look fine enough. If anyone looked at her oddly, she was used to getting people to back away with a glare.

…It's time to leave.

She let out a snort toward the man behind her and began walking.

After the first step, her body naturally started forward.

There was no excess strength or guilt in her gait, so she gave a sigh of relief and continued forward.

She hesitated a bit when she thought about Moira 1st.

When giving the maids their names, she had been trying to make a nice change to their environment.

…But that was an unneeded bother for their master.

She decided to leave.

A strange conflict involved the master of this place and he did not seem to want her getting involved.

She recalled her continuing attempts to find a job. Right up until the last moment, she would think about the things to do if she joined that company, but she always left before it really started.

This is the same thing, she complained in her heart.

Apollo did not follow behind her. That irritated her, so she quickened her pace.

But…

"…"

She suddenly stopped.

…What am I doing?

That thought began with her right hand holding the staff.

She felt heat in that hand.

During the day, she had repeatedly swung down the hoe. The heat in her grip was similar to pain.

She had used the hoe to dig up some dirt, placed the dirt in the pots, and planted the seeds the automatons had taken their names from.

Their pots were now lined up along the southern edge of the white building.

She had been a part of all that.

"…"

…Can I really just leave?

"Naïve", "child's play", and other terms people had constantly said to her floated up in her mind.

But her focus shifted to the pain in her hand.

…I managed to accomplish something, didn't I?

The automatons had taken their names and wanted her to use them. To record them perfectly, it was apparently best to have a trustworthy person use the name.

The approximately sixty faces she had memorized the night before had been matched to as many names.

The first automaton to be given its name, Violet, had then asked for her name.

She had once more answered "Miyako".

Her father had given her that name so that a great many people would gather around her. [1]

She thought about her own name and the name the automatons had started calling her.

…Well?

"Was I…?"

…Was I trying to escape my name?

"…"

It took her a moment to answer. Many different thoughts appeared in her mind, but she discarded them in an instant.

She was good at cutting through to a clear answer. She was also good at regretting and forgetting.

She turned her stopped feet backwards. She frowned, clenched

her teeth, and likely had a terribly grim expression, but she knew that was to hide her true thoughts.

And even if she tried to hide it, she did have true thoughts behind it.

So she made a certain decision.

…I'll stay here.

"There has to be something I've left undone."

She turned around to say something to Apollo. He was trying to have her leave, so she wanted to somehow gain his permission to stay.

But she saw something unexpected.

"Wait."

He was sitting on the ground where he had been standing a moment before.

It looked like he had sunk down into the grass and he did not seem to be breathing.

"What are you doing, you idiot?"

She walked, ran, and hurried over while tossing aside the metal staff.

…What's going on?

Weren't only machines supposed to grow weak by the concept space's boundary?

She ran over and hurriedly sat next to him. He was sweating profusely, his breathing was shallow, and his face was almost completely white.

She had not been seeing things when he had looked pale earlier.

"You idiot."

As soon as she spoke, she felt as if all strength left her legs.

"Ah?"

She looked down and the grassy ground was shaking.

In that instant, she noticed that she and Apollo were near the edge of a cliff in the forest.

And the ground was crumbling out from under them and toward the slope.

"…!"

She fell.

●

A certain wooden room was about six square meters, had shelves of baskets on the wall, and had a scale and refrigerator.

The refrigerator said “Tamiya Family Property – No Modifications” on the side.

This was the changing room for the Tamiya house’s men’s bath. The clock on top of the shelves said 5:50 PM.

A figure entered through the sliding door to the right of the clock.

It was Shinjou.

She held a blue yukata and wore her school uniform.

“Um…”

She looked around to make sure the room was empty and then opened the frosted glass door to the bath.

She saw a tiled bath beyond the warm and humid air. The washing area was about six square meters and the fairly deep tub was just as large. The washing area had four faucets and showers, so she assumed the bath was usually used in shifts of four.

“Does your average house have a bath like this?”

She was only familiar with the large bath for UCAT employees and the even larger public bath named Eternal Sunflower, so she did not know how to judge the Tamiya family’s bathing space.

…I never expected to spend the night here.

It was due to the destruction of Hiba’s house.

Izumo and Hiba were staying in Sayama and Shinjou’s dorm room while Mikage and Kazami stayed in Izumo and Kazami’s dorm room. Someone had suggested letting Hiba and Mikage share a room, but the first term had only just ended and a lot of students had yet to return home. Izumo and Sayama had discussed it and reached the following conclusion.

“It’d start rumors if a first year and a blonde were seen entering the room of someone as well-known for his idiocy as Sayama.”

“You fool. If they were seen entering the room of a certain violent couple, people would think it was some new kind of bedroom play.”

From there, they had all settled on the current arrangement.

Mikage had looked discouraged which bothered Shinjou, but she had seemed to calm down a bit once Izumo had given her a diary from the things collected beneath the destroyed house.

When Shinjou imagine the diary as being like her binder, she felt a sense of relief.

…Everyone has something like that, don't they?

"Yeah," she said before closing the glass door to the deserted bath.

She went around to all the clothes baskets just in case, but they were all empty. There was truly no one in the bath.

Kouji and the others were in the kitchen preparing dinner for the night shift.

She and Sayama had eaten early and Sayama had gone to the living room to read the newspaper, but he had disappeared at some point.

If she wanted to safely take a bath, this was her chance. After all, this house was always under the influence of Sayama space. She needed to quickly finish her bath and get to sleep early in preparation for the training camp the next day.

She reached to the other side of the sliding door and placed a sign saying "in use by guest" on the outside column.

After that, she silently removed her clothes. She removed her shirt, pants, underwear, and socks to reveal her skin.

Setsu's body appeared from below the clothing.

She reached for a towel, loosely embraced her chest, and continued on. She opened the door to the steamy space.

"Wow."

The steam was much thicker than in the large baths she was used to and she quickly started sweating.

The sun was still setting outside the window. She could not see that light in the usual larger baths. She checked that the window was locked to ensure no one could peep and even checked the corners of the bath for hidden cameras.

She had the place to herself.

…Yay.

She crouched down as if covering her body with the steam and pulled over a nearby bath bucket.

"Hm?"

It was quite heavy because it was already filled with water.

She had not seen anyone in the bath, yet the water was warm. Wondering why, she observed more closely.

Something familiar was floating in the bucket: Baku.

The small animal was practicing its flutter kick with its front paws

on the edge of the bucket.

Shinjou frowned at the quiet splashing sounds. She looked around and even up at the ceiling, but…

"His owner isn't here."

Is Baku playing here on his own? she wondered.

Whatever the case, Sayama was definitely not here and she did not have time to hesitate.

"I need to finish my bath."

She spoke aloud to herself, grabbed a different bath bucket, and leaned out over the tub.

She looked down and her eyes met with Sayama's as he lay face up at the bottom of the tub.

"…"

Noticing her from the light blue tiles below the water, he raised a hand.

She even saw his mouth move as if giving a casual greeting.

"W-waaah!!"

Sayama responded to her shout by swiftly rising up and out of the water. Steam and water shot into the air and he brushed up his hair with his left hand.

"Phew. Why did you shout, Shinjou-kun? Did you see something strange?"

"Look in a mirror before asking that!"

Sayama turned toward the mirror on the bath's side wall and then frowned.

"I see. So that is the problem."

After his nonsensical comment, he fixed his wet bangs. He posed in front of the mirror, fixed his hair further, and then checked the shape of his face from an angle.

"That should be back to normal. You are surprisingly picky about appearances, Shinjou-kun."

"Sure." She nodded and smiled. "Um, Sayama-kun? I've discovered a fascinating new fact: you are insane!"

"This certainly is sudden. Calm down, Shinjou-kun. We can work out this misunderstanding. Do you have a question about something?"

"I'd rather not mention it for my sanity's sake, but…why were you submerged at the bottom of the bath?"

“Oh, that.” He raised his right arm to show off the UCAT watch on his wrist. “I have been training my lung capacity since I was quite young. I am still a long ways off from my best time.”

“Since you were quite young?”

“Yes. I used to compete with my grandfather. He would say I could not come out until I had counted to one hundred and then that horrible old man would hold my head under the water until I almost died. Later when he was submerged, I dumped in a bunch of detergent to sterilize him. The scene of him rampaging around in the bubbles was straight out of a monster movie. …Old people these days are all so horrible. Fortunately, their numbers were recently reduced by one.”

“I think someone is quickly growing into a decent replacement for him.”

“Ha ha ha. Do not worry. I am from a much higher caste than him.”

Shinjou felt that was reason enough to worry, but then he asked another question.

“Is there anything else you wish me to explain?”

“Um… Well, your clothes weren’t in the changing room.

“How very strange. I put them in the refrigerator like always.”

“What do you mean ‘like always’!?”

“It says ‘Tamiya Family Property’, doesn’t it? It actually functions as a safe. It used to be in the kitchen, but the key was lost for half a year. The contents were a sight to behold after that, let me tell you.”

“Okay, I think I understand the situation. …I was wrong to expect common sense from you inside the Sayama space.”

She turned her back, realizing it was all over. She could not take a bath now. She also decided to be cautious around the refrigerators in the house. With that decided, her smile began to look forced.

But then a figure appeared through the glass door leading into the bath. Shinjou only saw the color of flesh with a pink towel wrapped around it.

“Yahoo, Setsu-chan? I’m here to wash your back.”

“Eh? Ryouko-san?”

As Shinjou spoke up in confusion, a small wind suddenly wrapped around her.

In no time, her body changed into Sadame.

“…!”

She gasped just as the door began to open.

She frantically grabbed the frosted glass door to prevent Ryouko from opening it.

“Huh? Does this door not fit the frame right?”

“Th-that isn’t the problem! U-um, Sayama-kun!! Sayama-kun, um…!”

“What is it, Shinjou-kun. It is only Ryouko. There is no need to put up such a struggle.”

“No need? B-but we can’t let her see us!”

Ryouko reacted to that shout.

“Setsu-chan? What do you mean you can’t let me see you? Are the two of you doing something amazing?”

…A misunderstanding! How am I supposed to explain this? No, I have to avoid explaining it.

She had difficulty determining her priorities for various things and grew indecisive.

“Eh? Um, that isn’t it. You see… Why are you just watching, Sayama-kun!?”

“Lately, I have been wondering if I am being unintentionally rude to you, Shinjou-kun.”

“Th-this is no time to suddenly become considerate. Stop watching and get over here!”

“Ooh! I want to see, too! Let me in!!”

Ryouko began shaking the door like a monkey, but Shinjou endured.

“Ahh, Sayama-kun! Please grab on! Grab on and help me!”

“If you wish,” she heard him say.

A moment later, his hands firmly grabbed on…to her butt.

He firmly gripped her with fingers warmed from soaking in the

bath and he spoke calmly.

"Shinjou-kun, I have grabbed on, but what should I do now? You asked me to help, but there is not much I can do from this position."

"Sayama-kun, this is one of those unintentional things you were just mentioning. …Ahh! Stop it, Ryouko-san!"

As she shouted, new footsteps approached the changing room and the door leading into it slid open.

"Sister! What are you doing in the men's bath!?"

"Hm? You have to ask, Kouji? I want to wash Setsu-chan's back."

"You do know Setsu-kun is a boy, right? And he is not a part of our family."

"Don't be silly, Kouji you little scamp. If he's in our house, he's part of our family."

"Listen carefully. Different families have their own rules, so please try to abide by them when they are here. You can't suddenly throw our way of doing things at them. Setsu-kun might never come back again."

"Don't worry. I have a waterproof camera to help convince him to come back. …Ahh! Why would you take it away!?"

"To keep you from committing a crime!!"

Ryouko could be heard groaning in thought, but she quickly spoke up cheerfully.

"Listen, Kouji, listen. Um, I think Setsu-chan is actually a lot like us."

…She's surprisingly perceptive.

But Shinjou's thoughts did not reach Kouji. She heard him sigh.

"Sister, have you ever heard of common sense?"

"Of course. I got a 5 in Japanese language class."

"As a percentage score I assume? Also, this is the men's bath. As your aide, I cannot allow the president to corrupt the company's morals."

"Eh? You sure are strict, Kouji. I'm not doing work now, so I'm an individual instead of a president."

"Fine, fine. Then I say the same thing as your brother. Leave, sister."

"No fair!! Are you saying you'll let the young master and Setsu-chan in the men's bath but not me?"

"Yes, because those two are boys! Even if Setsu-kun would

probably become a victim of something or other before making it five meters in the Bronx!”

Oh, so that’s how they see me, thought Shinjou with an odd sense of understanding. *And Kouji is relatively normal, so it’s pretty convincing.*

The strength on the other side of the door vanished and she could hear receding sounds of the elder sister struggling.

“Ah! Wait, Kouji! Are you really going to throw me out in nothing but a towel!? You can’t do this just because mom and dad are away bear-hunting in Karuizawa. Oh, c’mon!! I’m gonna give you tons of curses!!”

…I can’t believe she would say that.

Shinjou’s shoulders relaxed, she swept aside the hands admiring her butt from behind, and she grabbed a bath bucket.

“Um, Sayama-kun? Is it always like this?”

“Lively, isn’t it?”

She felt no reason to say otherwise, so she sighed and nodded.

After pouring water over herself and entering the tub, her entire body relaxed.

She took a breath and Sayama sat next to her. She felt the hot water soaking into her body, but she shrank back a bit once he sat there.

She wondered why and quickly found the answer.

…Come to think of it…

“U-um, this is the first time we’ve bathed together with Sadame’s body, isn’t it?”

●

Shinjou used her hands to hide her body in the water and Sayama smiled bitterly next to her.

“Relax. I will not do anything you do not want.”

She felt like expressing her doubt, but decided against it.

There were times when that was true.

“Yeah, I know. I always resist and almost cry, but you stop.”

“About two months have passed while doing that, but has anything changed with your body?”

She shook her head.

She had made a promise on that night two months before when

she had first revealed her identity.

She had him occasionally check on her body, but she still did not have her period.

“There hasn’t been a change in my male body either.”

She felt like that wording was blaming him, so she wanted to say something more. She looked toward him in preparation and he tilted his head.

“What is it?”

“Oh, uh…”

She did not like these direct questions, but there were some things she could only say at times like this.

“U-um, I am happy with what you’re doing for me, so don’t worry. Even if I don’t act like it.”

She had wanted to say this for a while, but putting it in words made her blush.

She could not stand his gaze on her, so she looked away. While trying to convince herself she was flushed due to the heat of the bath, Sayama nodded and gave a small smile.

She looked away from that smile by lowering her head.

She reached forward, grabbed her knees, and pulled them toward her. While embracing her knees below the water, the tops of the knees rose above the surface. She placed her cheek on them and changed the subject.

“U-um, I think it might be hopeless.”

“What might?”

That response seemed to cool off the heat in her body.

She took in a breath and spoke the thoughts she had had when the night of nothing but a stomachache had arrived as always at the end of the previous month.

“My body might never develop properly. I might always have nothing but pain.”

She looked down at the bottom of the tub that wavered through the water.

But then something warm touched her right cheek. The damp and solid object was Sayama’s finger.

She looked up in surprise and heard a voice from the right.

“Do you remember when Kazami slapped you?”

“…”

“I do not want that to happen again. And to make sure it does not, I will help you with a different method. After all, this is what I want as well.” A smile filled his voice. “And if having nothing but pain means you cannot develop into an adult, I am the same.”

“…Ah.”

She quickly looked over her soaking shoulder.

She saw him looking at her with his expressionless face, but there was strength and harshness in that face.

Seeing that, she leaned up against him. She grabbed his left arm with her hands, bent her elbow to pull herself toward him, and placed her lowered forehead on his shoulder. When she opened her mouth to speak, it was no longer an apology that came out.

“Thank you.”

She nodded. As she lowered her head further, her mouth sank into the water and then rose once more. She decided to think more positively from now on and she spoke.

“U-um, we were switched out today, weren’t we?”

“Yes. In that concept space, you were me and I was you.”

They had not discussed it yet, but she felt relieved hearing that. That meant their thoughts were reaching each other and it meant she was human.

“Um, Sayama-kun? …How was my body?”

Sayama nodded with a serious expression and looked her in the eye.

“It was very, very delewdcate.”

“Yes. I know what I want to say, but I’m having trouble expressing it. It’s really irritating.”

“I see. Truly good words are hard to come by.”

Sayama leaned against the inner wall of the tub and folded his arms in thought.

Shinjou wondered what was on his mind, but then she remembered that morning.

Sayama’s body had been different from hers. She had initially been surprised by how much higher his vision was. And she had realized something else while looking down on her own body.

…He’s always looking at me properly.

Instead of looking down at her with his gaze, he would turn his face toward her, so she had done the same.

She belatedly wondered if she had been giving him upturned looks all this time.

When she had been handed Ex-St, her surprise had changed to complete astonishment. Ex-St had been so much lighter than when she moved it around. She had been able to run without losing her balance and without needing to catch her breath.

…And he's always matching his pace to mine.

When she had run at her usual pace in the concept space, she had noticed her own body falling behind.

I'm no match for him, she thought while lowering her head even further.

"Borrowing your body today got me thinking."

"Did you want to use my body to experience various things with a male body?"

"Y-yes. How did you know?"

"Ha ha ha. I had wanted to try that out as well. I thought it might help learn what is troubling you. If you are being held back by a mental issue, then what would happen with my mind?"

"Would it be wrong of me to borrow your body?"

"If it would help give you a sense of relief about your body changing, I see no problem with it."

…Really?

She anxiously held her own body, clenched her teeth, and gulped.

But she soon opened her mouth again.

"It's too late to try it out now, though. Too bad."

"A normal person would not have the chance in the first place. Even if we could not make use of that opportunity, we still have the same possibilities as anyone else."

"You're a persuasive talker…"

She smiled bitterly while feeling thankful for him. She made up her mind and steadied her breathing.

"Do you remember what I said before?"

"About what?"

"It was a while back, but I said I would…return the favor. I know you'll tell me not to force myself, but I managed to feel your body up close today. I'd like to use it as a reference point for my own. And if it makes you happy, it would make me happy. So…um…well…"

"I see. Then let us both do our very best."

“Sure. …No, wait! Your idea of ‘our very best’ is on a completely different level than mine!”

“Ha ha ha. In other words, yours is on a much higher level?”

Before she could deny it, he embraced her with a smile.

That smile caused her to relax and she spoke quietly as they pressed their bodies together.

“Let’s work together to do our very best in everything we do from now on.”

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[1] Miyako means “capital city”.

Chapter 18

“Future Circumstances”

Do you call ambition for oneself the ego?
Do you call ambition for others hope?
Do you really need to think so strictly?

●

When Miyako awoke, her vision was filled with scarlet light.

Every part of her vision, from the center on out, was filled with the colors of orange and reddish yellow.

She noticed the state of her body a moment later. She was lying on her back and the leaves of the forest and the sky lay before her.

Even the layers of green leaves were dyed red.

…It's evening.

She looked around and saw a shadowy form. That shadowy form was a man she recognized.

"Hey, you idiot!"

She quickly rose up for two reasons. First, she was not actually lying on the ground. He was holding her. And second…

"You're bleeding!"

She got up and turned around to find him sitting with his back to the earth that had crumbled from the cliff.

His blond hair was in disarray and dyed red by the light and something dark was flowing down his forehead. For an instant, she recalled her upperclassman in middle school who she hit in the head with a baseball, but she shook her head.

He was not bleeding as much as that incident.

A closer look showed his right arm was bent at a questionable angle. One of the two bones making up his forearm had to be broken.

"You idiot…"

She could tell he had protected her. She felt the pain of a scrape on the outside of her right calf, but it was a light injury compared to his. She could rub some spit on it and let it heal.

She looked around and saw no one else around. It had clearly been a fairly large landslide and the cliff had collapsed diagonally toward the inside of the concept space.

While atop the cliff, Apollo had said the concept weakened around the outer edge, but how strong was the concept here? They were farther from the outer edge than before.

She opened her mouth to call for someone, but something stopped her.

"There is no need to worry. I will heal before long," said a quiet

voice.

She turned around in surprise and breathed a sigh of relief that he was alive, but she spoke so as to hide her relief.

“Don’t try to protect me to show off, you idiot. You’re too weak for that.”

“And here I thought you might thank me.”

He wearily closed his eyes, but formed a smile with only his mouth.

That was the expression of his lies, so Miyako ignored it and took his right arm.

“It’ll hurt a bit, but bear with it. I’ll set it in place.”

“No need. It’s no use, so please stop. You’re being a nuisance.”

“Don’t be stupid. Is that anything to say to the person you just tried to save?”

“Are you any different, Miyako? You are complaining to the person who saved you.” He gave the mouth-only smile once more. “Why didn’t you leave? Now is your only chance. This base will soon prepare for battle and we will be unable to let you go. …I hear you are ‘job hunting’. In other words, you are being tested in order to join an organization.”

“That doesn’t matter. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“It does matter,” he insisted. “Miyako, you live in the world beyond that wall. You must leave those of us who live on this side of the wall. You should prioritize your own future over us.”

“Even if I still have things left to do here?”

“You mean naming the automatons? It makes no difference whether they have names or not.”

“Yes, it does!!” she roared back.

She was aware she was losing her cool, but it was too late.

She grabbed his collar and made him face her. As soon as he opened his narrow eyes, she stared into them.

“My name is Miyako. My father gave me that name so a great number of people would gather around me. You have the name of the sun god and you have that power, don’t you? Are you saying it’s meaningless to give those maids names and let them trust in their own strength!?”

“You truly trust in your name, don’t you?” His eyebrows lay flat and he looked her directly in the eye. “But my father was not like

yours. He gave me my name, controlled what I did, and then left after forcing everything onto me. …And I can no longer live up to my name. 3rd-Gear's sun was lost and there are no more people to wish for a king. Having a name includes things like that as well."

Apollo spat out a short laugh.

"Go home, Miyako. Go home and tell your father you gave names and strength to a great number of people who gathered around you, but then a heartless man prevented you from doing anything more. That gives you enough of a reason to go crying to your father, doesn't it? Return to that father who understands you, unlike mine."

"My father died ten years ago! He left to save others and died!" said Miyako. "Do you even know what Christmas is, foreigner!? I got into a lot of trouble as a kid and I was always thinking that I should be honest with my dad at some point. I used that as an excuse to buy him a small bottle as a Christmas gift, since he loved alcohol. He laughed and we both promised never to drink too much. That was when he first told me why he gave me my name. He said he had work to do and we could discuss it more later, but that was the last I ever saw of him!"

Had he understood her or not?

…I can never know what he thought of me.

She then realized they were more or less arguing over who had been the most unfortunate.

She did not like it, but she could not forgive someone who thought of themselves as unfortunate.

…Even in similar circumstances, I never thought of myself as unfortunate.

After all…

"A lot happened after that. I'm not trying to whitewash the past, but there's one thing I can never forget: the meaning of my name. And I'm trying to live up to that name! Even if my dad is gone and no one is expecting it of me, I won't back down when it comes to my name!"

She punctuated her words with a headbutt and felt the impact.

It brought pain, but the man shook his head once and glared at her beyond that pain.

She heard him speak.

"You're trying to live a life you aren't ashamed of? You won't back

down? Don't be naïve!"

An answering headbutt reached her.

The sound of impact rang through her head.

It had a decent ring to it.

This bastard's not half bad, she thought as she was knocked back and quickly recovered.

She started with a return hit.

"Urah!"

But the sound of impact was weak because he had kept his head from being knocked back.

They pressed their foreheads together, he grounded his teeth together, and he spoke some more.

"Leave, Miyako. If you are that insistent, then use your name to take on the world outside of here."

"Yeah, I will leave and I will take on that world. But I'll finish things here first."

"What is there to finish here? Do you like being pampered by automatons that much?"

"I'll overcome that pampering!"

She gave a point-blank headbutt and pushed him away with the movement of her head.

"The automatons started saying they were grateful for what I had done. I'll go from being a guest and become someone who can do for them what they can't! What's wrong with that!?"

"That is for their master to do!"

"If you'd been doing it, I wouldn't have been able to take your place!"

"Then are you trying to become their master!? Are you doing these things while setting aside the final human of 3rd-Gear and ignoring his decisions!? How will you take responsibility? The automatons would not have changed if you had left well enough alone, so how will you take responsibility for changing them!?"

His question was accompanied by a headbutt and it was quite effective.

She felt briefly dizzy and somewhat reevaluated him.

…He's got a decent amount of resolve.

There was more to a fight than having resolve, but that could be the deciding factor in some things. Without resolve, one could not

gather the strength needed to withstand pain.

His question shook her resolve and filled himself with it. That synergy caused twice the damage.

His question of responsibility had likely been what he truly thought, so Miyako opened her mouth to speak.

To bring back her shaken resolve, she did not bother calculating anything out in her mind. If he was throwing his true thoughts her way, she would say what was on her mind as well.

“You don’t know what to do, do you? You lost your world, you lost your father, and now you don’t know what to do.”

I’m tearing into him, she realized. *But I’m also talking to my old self.*

But these were her true thoughts. She did not hold back and she did not think about the consequences.

She went on to say something she should not have if she wanted to maintain an amicable relationship.

“I don’t care about taking responsibility. It doesn’t matter to me that your world was destroyed.” She raised her head. “But I know what I’d do if I were you. I’d eventually find a job in the outside world. I’d make sure of it. Once I desired that, I’d go to the place I desired, work there, become accepted there, make mistakes, complain, kick my boss, get punched by my boss, become friends with my boss, and all the while create something and earn money. And…”

“And?”

“I’d use that money to feed the automatons here.”

She faced forward and saw Apollo’s yellow eyes looking her way.

“The automatons do not need you in order to be fed. They are self-sufficient. In fact, they do not need to eat anything other than small amounts of fuel. And how would you feed all of the automatons here? Would you earn enough money to pay them all a wage?”

“Are you stupid? People don’t eat food. They eat satisfaction.”

She felt she was being naïve, but this was what she truly thought.

Strength filled her grip on his collar. *This will work,* she told herself before saying what she had wanted to say at the company interview.

“Money, food, things, social status, questions, answers, going somewhere, returning home, doing something, destroying

something, being with someone, and leaving someone are all forms of the same sense of satisfaction!!" she said. "If serving people is what automatons do, then even a small amount of money will make a record of that service. Even adding on one more coin to the pile will make a noise they can store in their mechanical memory and the number of those stored noise will show the passage of time as they've served their master. Those memories will prove that it happened in the real world and not just in their heads."

"And what will that accomplish? That is sentimentality and you are forcing it onto them."

"What's wrong with sentimentality? Even machines remember the past and they need some proof to feel pride in their work. If that kind of sentimentality is wrong, are you saying it's wonderful to have no emotions at all, Apollo!? If you do nothing and avoid any emotions, you'll never gain the pride you might lose and you won't have any pain in your past! But isn't it the lack of those things that led to the destruction of 3rd-Gear's people and left only machines behind!?"

She laughed.

"The hopeless humans who had lost their emotions died off while the machines with the ability to gain those things survived. And where's the god who made your world like that?"

"Well…"

"That god is no longer just in our minds. He's in the sky above those machines who are growing flowers! When those flowers inevitably die, it will scar those dolls' memories and I'll tell them not to fear the fact that flowers die. Just as they let the flowers bloom to create their own pasts, the flowers created their pasts to leave behind seeds. The same satisfaction lies in both the dolls and the flowers. I'll find my satisfaction in increasing 3rd-Gear's sentimentality like that, so I'll be perfectly happy ignoring you as you reject that satisfaction!"

She swung back her head and felt strength fill her entire body.

…This will definitely work.

She gave one last comment as she swung her head toward his forehead.

"Just you watch! If you insist on being an emotionless master, I'll become a sentimental master!"

Her shout was immediately answered by a voice from the cliff overhead.

“Is that true, Lady Miyako!?”

Moira 1st’s sudden voice was followed by a few dozen figures leaning out from the cliff.

Miyako froze in place when she heard the sounds of several people moving at once. She looked up at the cliff while still holding Apollo’s collar and pulling him toward her.

Moira 1st and the other maids were gathered below the scarlet sky. Moira 2nd was missing, but all those she had named were there.

Miyako looked at them while on her knees.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“We arrived to save you two, but Lord Apollo said he wished to speak with you first.

Hearing that, Miyako looked down and saw the young man’s shoulder’s shaking as he averted his gaze.

…That son of a bitch.

“Were you faking when you looked unconscious before?’

“Yes, I suppose you could put it that way.”

“And…were you guiding my thoughts?”

“Such cruel suspicion, Miyako. I simply wanted to speak honestly with you.”

“Oh? That’s surprising.”

She nodded and some new dark emotion welled up from the bottom of her gut.

She opened her mouth to speak and only a simple verb escaped.

“Die.”

“Ha ha. No need to be so violent, Miyako. Women should speak with more lovely language than that.”

“Have a lovely death.”

“W-wait. Calm down, Miyako.”

“Death is an instant. Not even I can make it wait.”

“You are quite the poet.”

“Then do I need to write you an elegy? Viva the afterlife.”

As she spoke, Miyako realized something.

…Huh?

She grabbed his right hand and looked at his supposedly broken

right arm.

"What is it, Miyako? Is there something wrong with my arm?"

It was no longer broken.

She felt her back tremble, but not from fear or surprise. She did not understand the truth in her hand, so she gained a feeling of the unknown.

But as she remained speechless, Apollo pulled on her hand and lightly brushed off his arm.

"It seems to have healed. The people of 3rd-Gear have long lives, after all."

"S-sure," she agreed while thinking back.

According to Moira 1st, the people of 3rd-Gear had long lives, but their metabolisms were about the same as the people of Low-Gear.

…So why did his arm heal so quickly?

The injury on his forehead was also gone. She touched her own forehead and found no blood on it. That meant his forehead injury had healed before the exchange of headbutts had begun.

…What's going on?

As she thought, Apollo stood up and the maids descended the cliff to meet him. The maids held their hands down, used their gravitational control to press and hold the crumbled cliff face in place, and jogged down.

Moira 1st took the lead and she looked back and forth between the two humans with a smile.

"We have now reconfirmed the two of you as our masters."

"No, um. I was only…"

As soon as Miyako frantically spoke up, Apollo turned his back and his shoulders shook.

Once she realized he was laughing, Miyako felt her cheeks flush. She assumed no one could tell in the evening sun, so she turned toward Moira 1st, relaxed her shoulders, and had a single thought.

…Well, that's how it turned out.

"Fine then. I'll help out where I can. A university student working to find a job in modern Japan only knows the ideal form of a corporation and I've heard people seeking a workplace to achieve their goals is the way out of a recession. Sorry I don't have the experience to say anything that isn't straight out of a textbook."

She took a breath and spoke in response to Moira 1st's

deepening smile and the smiles of expectation behind her.

“Doing nothing is an acceptable choice too. It’s a whole lot better than actively making thing worse. Still, I want to do something with this world that’s being wasted.”

●

“Really, what is going on?”

A voice filled a small, oblong room.

The student dorm room contained a bunk bed and the lockers near the entrance were labelled “Center of the World – Sayama” and “Sensible One – Shinjou”.

The beginnings of night could be seen through the window across from the entrance and someone sat at the desk by the window. The short boy had a white bandanna around his head and he wore a black T-shirt and the pants of his school uniform.

He spoke to someone over a cell phone.

“How is Mikage-san doing? Oh, that’s her journal. She writes in it every day. Could you put her on for a moment?”

After a few seconds, he spoke toward the sounds coming from the phone.

“Mikage-san, you’re writing in your journal, aren’t you? I don’t think I’ll be able to read it today, but would it be okay if I read it tomorrow morning when we travel to Okayama with the others?”

After a short silence, he lowered his head a bit.

“I’m sorry. I should have been more reliable. Anyway, I’ll call again in the morning, but you can have Kazami-san call me if there are any problems. Don’t worry. She’s my upperclassman, so she holds a higher position than me and you can trust her. I promise she won’t do anything you don’t want. Can you put her back on?”

After more silence, he scratched at his head.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. I can somehow understand her even though she can’t speak. I just have an idea what she’s probably thinking. Sure, I’ll put Izumo-san on.”

Izumo appeared from the bottom bunk wearing a black track suit and raised a hand toward the boy by the window.

The boy tossed the cell phone and Izumo caught it

“What is it, Chisato? Are you lonely?” he asked sleepily. “Yeah, Hiba said something about understanding her even when she

doesn't speak. Making all those assumptions seems pretty dangerous to me."

"I-Izumo-san! You're ruining everything!"

"Hm? Don't worry about it, Chisato. It's just the complaints of a small fry. We can get across what we want to say without speaking too. Like when we're in bed every night and- you'll kill me if I say any more? You'll shove me out of the helicopter tomorrow? Ha ha ha. No need to be shy."

"That's being shy?"

Hiba glared over from the window, but Izumo ignored him.

"Well, I hope you can enjoy your time with Mikage. It's been a while since you've had a female roommate, hasn't it?"

"Oh, can you pass something on to Kazami-san? Tell her not to help Mikage-san when she uses her cane to walk and not to help her even if she trips. And even if it's easier to communicate in writing, tell her to avoid it if possible. It might take longer, but she can figure out what Mikage-san is saying from her limited pronunciation."

"You sure are strict."

"Mikage-san is the one that wants it."

"Oh?" Izumo sounded impressed. "Did you hear that, Chisato? Of course, I hear it caused quite a commotion when you reserved the women's bath for her. She's pretty mature."

For a while, Izumo simply nodded as he listened to the voice over the phone.

After a fair number of comments and about seven nods, he turned to Hiba.

"Do you have anything to say?"

"No," answered Hiba.

Izumo passed it on, hung up, sighed, and placed the phone in the charger stand on the floor.

"Now then."

Izumo faced Hiba and Hiba frowned.

"What is it? You look like you have something to say."

"I was just thinking how strange it is that my grandfather, yours, and Sayama's all knew each other."

"It is a strange feeling. But…"

"But?"

Hiba scratched his head apologetically.

“I still have no intention of telling you about the second impurity. Sorry.”

“That’s fine, but did that battle this morning make you want to join us?”

Hiba gave a troubled smile and did not answer, so Izumo gave a quiet laugh.

“Hiba, what do you plan to do if the battle with 3rd-Gear ends?”

“That’s easy. That should mean Mikage-san can evolve once more, so I would leave Keravnos with all of you and live in peace.”

“Are you fighting for her evolution?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I think she isn’t evolving because we have to fight and because we don’t have the Concept Core. I just want to be with her and-…”

“Don’t say it all. You’ll spread the feeling too thin.”

“Perhaps, but do you have anything like that?”

“Yeah. I’m always thinking about…well, unspeakably dirty things I can do with Chisato and- What’s with that look? Is that not what you meant?”

“No, but I did gain a bit of respect for you. About 20%…no, 15%.”

Izumo nodded in satisfaction.

“But it doesn’t look like that’s all there is to it. Do you have another reason?”

“Yes. 3rd-Gear’s Typhon abducted someone the other night, remember? Well, I lost an older sister a long time ago. She went missing.”

“An older sister?”

“Yes. My grandfather took her in about ten years ago. It was about three months after Mikage-san arrived. He said he was making her his granddaughter.”

“What kind of girl was she?”

“Despite being a girl, she was an incredibly good swordfighter. I was no match for her at all. I tried so many times to get up close and grope her breasts, but I never managed it.”

“I see. If someone as agile as you couldn’t manage it, she must’ve been quite something.”

Hiba nodded, but clenched his right fist and gathered strength in

it.

“I don’t know how it would turn out now. At the time, my father had died and I think my grandfather was planning to make her his successor, but she suddenly vanished about a year later.”

“Vanished? What was her name? I might be able to check on it with IAI’s intelligence network.”

“Her name was Miki. Do you know a Hiba Miki?”

“No.” Izumo scratched his head. “Sorry. But you think it might’ve been 3rd-Gear’s doing, don’t you?”

“We’ve covered more or less why I’m fighting, but what about you?”

“Because it’s fun. Why else?”

His immediate and casual response caused Hiba to stop moving.

After a few seconds of silence, Hiba frowned.

“Fun? People die in these battles.”

“I can’t help it if I find it fun and there’s no point in lying. I’ve given this a fair bit of thought even if I don’t have as much combat experience as you.” A bitter laugh leaked from his mouth. “I have divine protection from my mother, a place where I can go all out, my bonds with Chisato, my trust with my foolish underclassmen and comrades, and other things you wouldn’t believe if I said them aloud. And for the moment, I find all those things out there on the battlefield. With a normal life, I’d probably find them on a sports team or in a club, though.”

“Are you treating the concept battles like a sport?”

“The classroom and the workplace are their own kind of battlefield. Or do you think your battlefields are especially harsh compared to school or work?” Izumo looked straight at Hiba. “If so, you need to apologize to everyone staring out the school window or doodling in class. And you need to apologize to the people standing behind the register or riding a scooter around delivering pizzas. You can apologize by stripping naked, fully prostrating yourself on the ground, and having a photo shoot. And make sure to do it outside.”

“I-I don’t want to do that outside! Oh, but I don’t want to do it inside either.”

“I see. So you don’t like exhibitionism. Then remember this,” said Izumo. “You’ll find battlefields everywhere. No matter where you go, some people win, some lose, some succeed, and some fail. And

people can leave or die in accidents anywhere. All I'm saying is that I want to enjoy it all if possible. In that way, there's no such thing as a fun and peaceful life where you do nothing. If you want to find real peace…"

"Yes?"

"It's when you sleep with the girl that means the world to you. Although you could say that's its own kind of battle. So are you going to do nothing but sleep with Mikage?"

"That's not possible… And you're absolutely horrible. My respect for you rose to 30%, though."

"Good, good." Izumo nodded. "Anyway, I heard from Chisato that you've been taking baths with Mikage every day."

"W-wait a minute! Someone needs to wipe down her body and help her when she can't get up from the bath."

Hiba frantically stood from his chair, but Izumo held out a hand to stop him while sitting on the bed.

"No need to panic. I'm not criticizing you. In fact, I heard that her body is still not fully made. Is that true?"

"Yes." Hiba slowly sat back down and crossed both his legs and arms. "I couldn't say it before because she was with us, but nothing related to being a girl has developed. I think it's because her evolution stopped before she had any knowledge about that stuff."

"Does she have the knowledge now?"

"Yes. An upperclassman in my club works part-time at Yokota, so I asked him to get me a foreign textbook. Mikage-san's questions when she reads it are so unintentionally severe that you would have a hard time making me that embarrassed if you tried. She'll lean up against me or suddenly take off her clothes to compare with the textbook. I'm just…how should I put it? I don't know what to do!"

"Calm down, boy. To her, she's just trying to learn. You need to restrain yourself. Although I suppose she isn't equipped for it even if you couldn't."

Hiba narrowed his eyes at that and sank a bit in his chair.

"She sometimes asks if I would be happier if she were a proper girl."

"What do you say?"

"I'm not telling."

Hiba smiled bitterly and Izumo did too.

“Well, from what I can see, she’s a good girl. I thought she would be more reliant on you, but she’s actually doing what Chisato tells her.”

“She’s neutral about anyone I don’t view as an enemy. The only people she will smile at or let touch her without getting cautious are my mother, my grandparents, and me.”

“She smiles?”

“That was the first thing she learned with her evolution.”

“I see.”

Izumo nodded but did not ask further.

Hiba then seemed to realize something, looked around with a serious expression, and shrugged.

“Anyway, what’s the deal with Sayama-san and Shinjou-san?”

“What do you mean?” asked Izumo.

“There are rumors going around the school that they’re in a homosexual relationship,” he said quietly. “The Daily Rose Taka put out by the girls newspaper club is serializing a novel, the school-wide hard gay poll had Sayama-san at the top, and they were seen embracing each other this morning.” Hiba slapped his knee. “Oh, right. Kazami-san might know something. I hear she was at the school department store with Shinjou-san buying swimsuits. And both of them bought girl’s swimsuits.”

“Wait just a moment. I need to check on something.”

Hiba tilted his head as Izumo pulled out his cell phone.

“Hey, Chisato? Have we not told Hiba about Shinjou?”

As Hiba continued tilting his head, Izumo quietly said something into the phone and nodded a few times. Finally, he slowly returned the phone to its stand.

“…”

He sank back onto the edge of the bed, hung his head, and rested that head on his hand.

“D-did something happen?” asked Hiba.

“Well, it looks like we’ll be seeing a lot of each other for a while, so I should probably tell you.”

“Is it about Sayama-san and Shinjou-san?”

“Yeah.” Izumo nodded and faced Hiba with a serious expression. “Keep it a secret, but everything you’ve heard is true.”

“Really?”

Izumo said nothing and did not nod, but then he sighed.

“As your upperclassman, I order you to sleep on the top bunk tonight. I don’t want to catch the Sayama germs.”

“W-wouldn’t Shinjou-san’s bed be the same?” asked Hiba as he stood.

His foot caught on the chair and the chair’s wheels sent it sliding into the dresser to the side. The collision produced a dull noise.

“Oh, s-sorry. And this isn’t even my room.”

“I wouldn’t poke around over there. You might find some evidence.”

“P-please don’t scare me like that.”

Hiba moved to the dresser hidden behind the bed, so he left Izumo’s sight.

“It looks like something fell from the top of the…”

Hiba trailed off and the silence continued for several seconds.

After a few more seconds of nothing, Izumo tilted his head.

“Hey, Hiba. What’s the matter?’

“Um, Izumo-san?”

Hiba moved out from behind the bed holding something white. He spread out the white object between his hands.

“This fell from the top of the dresser.”

“Looks like girl’s underwear to me.”

“D-don’t act like it’s normal! Why is this here!?”

“Let me be blunt: with Sayama and Shinjou, it is normal.”

“Wait a minute! Have this schools morals completely crumbled!?”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Izumo as he stood up and slapped his own chest. “Well? Do you see how normal I am now?”

“I think you’re making an unfair comparison.”

“Don’t worry about that either. Anyway, at the Seto Inland Sea training camp tomorrow, I order you to share a tent with Sayama. Good luck. I know you can manage.”

“No, I can’t!!”

As soon as he shouted out with the girl’s underwear in his hand, the chime indicating lights out rang.

●

A hard sound broke through the stillness.

In the forest below the night sky was a clearing behind a lit

factory.

The fifty meter clearing had been created by digging down into the ground and it contained two figures.

The two figures in the darkness were female.

They were both tall, they both had long black hair, and they both held wooden swords, but one was collapsed on the ground.

The one who had fallen to a sitting position was the younger of the two. The girl had sharp eyes, she wore a white denim shirt and jeans, and she clicked her tongue.

“You’re the same as always, Tatsumi.”

She glared up at her opponent. The girl named Tatsumi’s wooden sword was hanging down and not at the ready.

Tatsumi wore a yellow dress and a white cardigan and she had a smile on the eyes below her hair which was brushed to the side.

“If you can give me a look like that, you have the right attitude, Mikoku. You have to leave before long, right? If you’re catching the ten o’clock train to Yokohama, you need to leave here by eight.”

“Isn’t that a little early?”

“You’re going to Yokohama and you’ll be eating dinner there, right?”

Mikoku sighed, ignored Tatsumi’s subsequent complaint, and pointed toward the factory with her chin.

“I would love to visit Chinatown there, but Shino has prepared something for today.”

“Really? But she has her own work to do. …Alex, where is Shino?”

“Asleep. On top of me.”

The voice seemed to come from a megaphone, but it did not reach the surrounding area. It was a directional voice.

“I see,” replied Tatsumi as her shoulders lowered. “If Shino has prepared something, that may be better.”

“That would be best. I’m sure she has made much more than necessary.”

Mikoku began to stand up.

“…!”

But Tatsumi stepped up to her and swung her wooden sword at the younger girl’s ankle.

Mikoku evaded the high-speed attack by using her standing

motion to jump straight up and she brought her wooden sword toward Tatsumi.

"!"

Tatsumi was already twisting her body upwards.

The sword swinging down responded to the twisting by jumping upwards.

A clear sound filled the air and Mikoku's wooden sword broke in half. Pieces of cloth scattered from her shirt's collar and wind struck her cheek.

She could do nothing while in midair and something struck her chest.

The hard and gently pointed object was the tip of Tatsumi's wooden sword.

The wooden weapon was lightly pressed against her sternum and a smile gave a warning from the other end of the weapon.

"Open your mouth and breathe out."

Before she could, something happened.

Strength slowly gathered in the tip of the sword. It was not enough strength to provide pain, but it accelerated over a series of instants.

"This will knock you away, so prepare to land!"

Exactly that happened while still providing no pain.

Tatsumi vanished from Mikoku's vision and was replaced by the sky.

Mikoku did not know what had happened.

She finally realized she had rotated around, but then her back struck the grassy embankment making the edge of the clearing.

"…!"

She had known this would happen, so she was sprawled out and relaxed. The air in her lungs had vanished and her loosening muscles opened up her chest before she could try to breathe in.

She was able to take a normal breath of oxygen which steadied her vision.

Where is Tatsumi? she thought.

The other girl's location would tell her how far she had been thrown.

But that idea proved fruitless because Tatsumi stood to her right.

"You are absurd."

“You should be able to do this much yourself.”

“…”

She did not think she could, but she did not feel like saying it now. They had argued countless times and she always lost.

As Mikoku remained silent, Tatsumi narrowed her eyes and held out a hand.

“I taught you a good bit in today’s lesson. Do you realize that?”

“Yes,” she agreed while reaching out her own hand.

Their hands touched.

“…”

An instant later, Mikoku heard her own footstep below her.

This was simply because Tatsumi had lifted her up in an instant. That footstep had been the sound of her standing.

Tatsumi stood before her like always and that made Mikoku gulp.

“Stick with it, okay? You haven’t been putting much effort into it lately.” Tatsumi narrowed her eyes. “You were not made Hajji’s bodyguard this time out of trust or obligation. Of course you weren’t. You understand, don’t you? You can use that technique too.”

“But I have never gotten a single attack on you during training.”

“You’re the type that shines during real battles.” Tatsumi shot down that excuse and tilted her head with a smile. “The trick is to carefully observe your opponent and use your strength to its fullest. If you observe them, you can see how to evade or block as much as possible, right? I prefer to block and knock them away, but you would likely do better evading and using their own movements to cut them down.”

Tatsumi made a small spiral movement with her outstretched hand.

That motion was the trick to scooping up one’s opponent’s strength and using it against them.

終わりのクロニクル

Mikoku had never succeeded in using it.

…I do best when simply using my full strength.

"I do not think I can fight like you, Tatsumi."

"You don't have to, but you'll be in trouble if you can't even keep Fafnir Custom's cannon from hitting you. What if Hajji or Shino had been shot immediately afterwards?"

A gentle summer breeze washed over the concept space as Tatsumi spoke.

"Don't worry, Mikoku. You can gain even more power than this and you will be able to master it for the sake of your world."

"How can you know that?"

"Because that is what you wish for," said Tatsumi. "Think about it. The more power people have or desire, the harder it is for them to fully utilize their power. I do not desire much power, but even I can reach this level."

So…

"The fact that you still can't fully utilize your power says you will grow to incredible heights."

"You're giving me too much credit. What I desire is a small thing." She brushed aside Tatsumi's hand, turned her back, and stepped up on the embankment. "I will wake Shino, eat dinner, and head to Kurashiki. Shino has her own mission to deal with."

She heard a sigh from behind her.

"Are you worried about Shino?"

"Yes. Even if she will have Shiro with her, she is still-…"

"She'll be fine. The problem is how worried you are, Mikoku," said the voice behind her. "I've thought this for a while, and I think I should tell you now that you are taking on Army missions as an individual. Mikoku, what are you fighting for? Answer me like this is teen film."

●

Mikoku could not answer Tatsumi's question.

…What am I fighting for?

She knew the answer, but it was no one else's business. Not even Tatsumi's.

She remained silent, stepped on the grassy embankment, and began walking away.

“You can’t do it like a teen film?”

“No,” she answered. “I can’t do it like a yakuza movie or a monster movie either.”

“Yeah, that probably wouldn’t work. Although doing it like last week’s Heidi vs. Mecha Onji could be good.”

“They never showed how the fight between Mach Peter and Giant Clara turned out, so I give that one a D. Anyway, if you have something to say, stop beating around the bush and say it.”

She turned around on the embankment and found Tatsumi had not moved.

As Tatsumi looked up from halfway up the embankment, the moonlight illuminated her quiet smile.

That expression was enough for Mikoku to draw back.

“If you want me to tell you, I will,” said Tatsumi while still smiling. “I believe I know what you are thinking concerning Shino. Once the coming battle with UCAT is over and this world is ours, you will leave everything to Shino and disappear.”

“…”

For a moment, Mikoku was unsure what to say.

…How does she know that?

She forced herself to shrug in order to hide the surprise in her heart. She gave a mocking laugh and tried to deny Tatsumi’s allegation.

She opened her mouth, but Tatsumi spoke before she could.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell Shino and she won’t be able to tell how desperate you are unless she crosses swords with you.”

“Wait, Tatsumi. Enough with the crazy delusions.”

“You wanted me to tell you, didn’t you? You have no right to stop me from speaking, so I will speak and you will listen to the end. If you have any complaints, then feel despair and do so with a loud sound effect.”

“Shobon!!”

“Alex, you be quiet. And no eavesdropping on a conversation between girls.”

“Shobon…”

Tatsumi sighed, but Mikoku brushed up her hair while feeling the impatience inside her.

Tatsumi was exactly right.

The Army would eventually clash with UCAT and the Army would use its power to take the leadership role of this world.

But Mikoku knew a certain fact.

…Winning by force rarely ends well for you even if you manage to maintain control afterwards.

If the Army gained the rights to the world after their victory, Mikoku felt it would be best to leave those rights with the person who seemed the farthest removed from the Army's power.

And as the one who used that power, she would have to distance herself from that person.

…I need to distance myself from Shino.

But Tatsumi had also mentioned how she had realized this.

…She realized I was desperate as we crossed swords?

"Tatsumi," she called out. "Why is my being desperate related to Shino?"

The answer came immediately.

Tatsumi opened her mouth and spread her arms in the moonlight.

"That's simple. Being desperate means you are willing to die, but why are you willing to die? Normally, people do not die for their own sake. That means it's for someone else, and with you, who could it be but Shino?"

Tatsumi's shoulders moved and she arrived before Mikoku's eyes before the younger girl could prepare.

She could not even cry out in surprise before Tatsumi held a hand over her head.

The hand was clenched into a fist and pointed down.

"You idiot."

A great noise burst from the space between the fist and head, pain shot from the top of her head to her butt, and all strength left her legs.

"…!!"

She held her head and crouched down while Tatsumi sighed and put her hands on her hips.

"Y'know," said Tatsumi as if asking her to prepare for the coming words.

Mikoku looked up toward that swordsmanship teacher who had stopped smiling and gave a relaxed expression.

"Mikoku, you're fighting for Shino's sake," came Tatsumi's voice.

“But if you die, it will be Shino’s fault. That’s what it means to fight for someone else’s sake. You are able to fight because they are there, but it will also mean you died because they were there. It means you would not have died if they had not been there.”

“…”

“It’s fortunate Shino has not realized what you are thinking. If she had, she would stop you from heading out to fight. She would tell you not to do that kind of thing for her. However, that would be more about escaping responsibility than about worrying for your safety.”

“Shino would never think about escaping responsibility!” reflexively shouted Mikoku. “She cares about others and she would never worry about her own responsibility!”

“That is why you can so easily blame your injuries on her. That isn’t fair, Mikoku.”

“…!”

“What’s with that look? Did I hit a sore spot? You can get mad if you want. Give a nice explosion of rage.”

Mikoku took action at that.

Her movement was sudden, but Tatsumi stepped back calmly as if she had predicted it.

However, Mikoku was able to see Tatsumi.

…To the right!

She used her instincts more than her eyes to step on the embankment and send her right hand out in a jab.

An instant later, she felt something wrap around that hand.

Her hand had been grabbed.

“Kh.”

She could not move. Her wrist was held in place and her legs were stopped by pressure on her thigh.

However, her hand had made it through.

“Is this the first time one of your attacks has reached me?”

Mikoku turned toward that question and found the two of them facing each other halfway up the embankment. Tatsumi’s right hand had grabbed her hand and Tatsumi’s usual expressionless face lay beyond their hands.

“That anger brought your attack to me, so who was that anger for?”

Mikoku’s vision rotated.

By the time she realized she had been thrown, the moon had come into view. She felt the pale moon looked like a glowing jewel.

"…!"

When she struck the ground, she was no longer anywhere near the embankment. She was near the center of the clearing twenty meters away. The impact made her cough and Tatsumi's voice reached her from the distance.

"You really can be stupid. Why did you let your guard down? Don't forget to prepare to land and make it easier on your lungs."

She did not have the composure to reply and she continued coughing as she got up and Tatsumi jogged to her side.

"C'mon, c'mon. Stand up and think. You have a decision to make. Will you yourself desire to fight or will place the blame on Shino? I will not say either one is right or wrong. If you choose to fight for yourself, you might selfishly head off to your own death," said Tatsumi. "But Shino is doing her best to be accepted by all of you. She's not doing it *for* you, though. She's doing it for herself."

"I…" she began until Tatsumi struck her head.

"You don't need to give your answer now. Don't be so hasty." Tatsumi laughed. "Think about it for as long as you need. Whenever you fight, you will hurt your opponent, they will hurt you, someone important to you may be hurt, and yet you will survive. Whenever that happens, see if you are glad that you survived. See if you can selfishly be more glad that you survived than that you hurt your opponent."

As Tatsumi spoke, she suddenly looked Mikoku in the eye and her expression crumbled into a smile.

"Don't make me lecture you too much, okay? Shino is obedient, so lecturing her is boring. You on the other hand fight back, so lecturing you is a lot of fun."

"That last half was nothing but forcing your own ideas on me."

But after standing up, Mikoku asked a question.

"If I fight, will I eventually be able to speak on and on about nonsense like that?"

"Do you want to?"

"I have no one to tell it to," said Mikoku. "And I think I need a partner like that if I am to find my reason to fight. I need someone who will not be shaken when I ask for the meaning of my actions and

who will accept it all with a smile."

"Am I not good enough?'

"Sorry, but you're just someone I train with. The kind of partner I need in order to fight is an enemy. I need an enemy to take Shino's place."

As she spoke, Mikoku realized something.

…Oh. I'm rejecting the idea of fighting for Shino's sake. I really am simpleminded.

She had not verified it and Tatsumi may have been guiding her there on a whim, but she was trying to choose some unknown enemy over Shino who she had been with for so long.

…But I don't want to make Shino cry when I get hurt.

There had once been a certain dog and that dog had saved Shino at the cost of its own life.

Had that dog done so for Shino's sake? If not, why had it done so?

…Did it think doing that would satisfy it?

Or had it been a sudden thing with no real thought behind it?

Mikoku did not know and Shino likely did not either.

What Mikoku did know was that Shino had still not forgotten that dog, that she would leave flowers and water for the dog, and that she would embrace the dog when it was summoned with the power of her philosopher's stone.

…Would the same happen if I died?

Part of her hoped so, but another part knew it would be painful.

"Painful…"

She made up her mind.

"But if you make something abnormal a part of everyday life, is there no avoiding that pain?"

Mikoku gave a nod and the harshness vanished from her face. She turned to Tatsumi and found the usual narrowed-eye expression.

"Do you have an enemy, Tatsumi?"

"Yes, I do. And I fight to ask a question."

"What question?"

"That is something only my enemy knows."

Mikoku did not know what that meant, so she could only nod toward the other girl's troubled smile.

"I see. I wonder if I have an enemy as well."

“Don’t you? For example, there is the one with the surname Sayama on Team Leviathan.”

“I’m not so sure. That boy knows nothing. …Do you think he will become my enemy once he learns the true meaning of the Leviathan Road?”

And…

“Will I be able to find my reason to fight before that happens?”

She looked up toward the moon.

Looking at the cold light of that pale arc, she nodded.

“I need to head out on my mission to protect Hajji. If that results in a fight, I may learn something.”

She lowered her gaze and looked Tatsumi in the eye.

“But why did you bring this up all of a sudden?”

“That’s simple,” said Tatsumi. “I felt like it.”

Chapter 19

“Pursuit into the Depths”

Some answers contain traps
That is normal
So destroy them without thinking of immersing yourself in them

●

The black clock on the wall indicated the time was four in the morning, but there were no windows on the white walls to let in the morning sun.

The large underground space was divided by several partitions and a woman walked along the western side. The woman, Tsukuyomi, walked to the director's desk on the south end while holding a bundle of documents.

The sound of her sandaled footsteps suddenly came to a stop.

Something lay at her feet. Namely, a figure in a lab coat had fallen forward and lay sprawled out before her.

She looked closer and spotted a nearby laptop.

"Oh, it's Kashima."

With that, she walked past him and he spoke up from behind her.

"You're going to ignore me, Director Tsukuyomi?"

"Yes, I assumed you were asleep."

"Adults don't sleep on the floor."

"I see."

She began to walk once more, but he quickly sat up.

"You don't want to know why I collapsed from shock?"

"I really don't, but if you're going to tell me anyway, get it over with."

"Natsu-san is so cruel. You know the wash toilet we're developing?"

"You mean the prototype product named 'Right There!'? You brought it home with you last night, didn't you?"

"Yes. Before leaving home, I hooked it up and set the spray pressure to 'anti-ship beam' since that's the main selling point. Well, Natsu-san called me during the night with a slight smile in her voice and told me I can't come home for three days as punishment. She even suspected it could take pictures. Honestly, she's so cute!"

"Hm. Your point?" she asked expressionlessly.

He stared blackly at her, looked to the side, and lowered his shoulders in a sigh.

Finally, he stared off into the distance and spoke in an earnest tone.

"This workplace has grown so brutal over the past few months.

Our boss is ignoring what her subordinates tell her."

"You really are going all out with your lovey-dovey side. And you're forcing your boss to listen to it."

"I am not being lovey-dovey. It just so happens that subjectively explaining the situation makes me feel happy."

"My sympathies. …Anyway, get to sleep. You're Team Leviathan's instructor, aren't you? I hear you're having difficulty putting together lessons recently."

Kashima stood up when he heard that.

"I'm managing by including some of my own interests."

He picked up his laptop and showed her the screen. The displayed window had a few spheres drawn inside it: ten small red spheres and one blue sphere.

He looked at the screen, smiled, and faced her.

"This is a simulation on the origin of the eleven Gears to confirm the meaning behind the Leviathan Road. The different UCATs have been researching this since World War Two and have achieved some results, but I doubt any of them know the answer. How the eleven Gears came about is still shrouded in mystery." Kashima tilted his head. "Anyway, I heard they were leaving for a training camp."

"They all left by helicopter at about three along with that boy named Hiba and that automaton named Mikage. They should have arrived above Nagoya at this point."

"I see."

"Are you interested in Mikage because of your grandfather and Susaou?"

He thought for a moment and eventually formed a weak smile.

"A little. After all, that Mikage was supposedly used to control Susaou. But I hear she doesn't remember it herself, so I'm hesitant to ask her directly."

"Yes, being considerate is a part of the job. Well, if you're lucky, you might get a chance to ask."

"Perhaps," he said while looking at what she held.

Seeing those documents led him to ask a question.

"Are those documents for the training camp?"

"I'm not going along for that. As a director, I have the right to cancel."

“But the Seto Inland Sea is where 3rd-Gear…”

“If it’s about my daughter, don’t worry. She wouldn’t get killed so easily. Plus, I think you’ll be more interested in this.”

She held up the documents so he could see.

“This is the report on the Georgius tests.”

Kashima pushed up his glasses, put his laptop under his arm, and stared straight ahead with a smile on the corner of his mouth.

“Nice. What did you find? What are its effects and its origin?”

“What do you think as someone who saw it firsthand when Yamata was sealed?”

“Its function is to amplify concepts, its purpose is to increase the power of concept weapons, and its origin is Low-Gear. Am I on the right track?”

“That’s a good question.” She gave a small smile. “You could be right and you could be wrong.”

“Why are you being so vague?”

“Because that’s all I can be.” She shrugged and her smile grew bitter. “I don’t know the answers. It didn’t react when I applied concept fields around it with the examination device. As far as I can tell, Georgius is nothing more than…”

“A glove?”

“Yes. What we saw for ourselves conflicts with the results of the tests.”

She had learned this after experimenting for the entire day.

She recalled Ooshiro’s face when he had agreed to lend her Georgius. There had definitely been a broad smile there.

…He doubted I could learn anything.

And in truth, she had not determined Georgius’s identity. She had learned very little else, but one fact stood out.

“At the very least, Georgius is strange. When Totsuka sealed Yamata, Georgius emitted light and the sword’s power increased. And the same thing supposedly happened in the battle with 1st-Gear.”

“Yes, Gram was apparently given power when it was too weak to withstand Fafnir Custom’s attack.”

“If Georgius did those things, there has to be something there, don’t you think?”

Tsukuyomi pulled a specific page from the report.

As she held it out to Kashima, he looked at her hand before looking at the document.

“Director Tsukuyomi.”

Her right hand was wrapped in bandages up to the wrist and she laughed toward the white cloth that was faintly stained with blood.

“Ha ha. I should have known better. When I wasn’t finding anything, I tried it without thinking. I put away the machine covered in a special defensive concept and grabbed it with my bare hand to try and put it on.”

The result lay before them.

“Doctor Chao says it will take two weeks for a full recovery. She’s going to the training camp, so she won’t start truly healing it until she gets back. I’m going to have to go out for meals for a while.”

“I see,” said Kashima slowly.

Whatever he was thinking, he took the paper while looking at her hand and then lowered his gaze to the printed paper.

“Is this…?”

“Looks like an ECG, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

The paper contained rectangular waves running along a graph. Such a graph would normally have a lot more written on it, but this only had about three waves.

“But what are these occasional pulses?”

“Check the unit of time.”

He looked above the graph and Tsukuyomi knew he would catch on if he was clever.

Sure enough, he frowned.

“What? One pulse at a rate of approximately eight hours?”

“Exactly. That is the faint vibration inside Georgius. Anyone who likes to jump to conclusions would say this means Georgius is alive.”

“…”

“Even in 3rd-Gear, some kind of internal mechanism is needed to supply a pulse to the metal parts. However, Georgius is nothing more than a leather glove and a metal chip and yet the pulse comes from both of them.”

Tsukuyomi did not know why that was, so she asked him.

He did not immediately reply but eventually spoke.

“It would be simpler to assume that Georgius is alive even so. If we cling to that theory and search deeper, we will at least know it is not alive if we find out we’re wrong.”

“Why do you think it is alive?”

This question received an immediate answer.

“It chose the one named Sayama as its master.” He took a breath. “What if that was not a setting and it wished for Sayama of its own free will?”

Tsukuyomi did not answer because she could not do so when she did not know the truth. He seemed to realize that because he lowered his head and apologized.

“Sorry, but to continue, Georgius was given to Sayama Mikoto by his mother. Can’t we assume it has a will of its own and was waiting for him?”

“Why do you ignore the possibility that it was set to do that and instead insist it has a will of its own?”

“If it was just a setting, it would only need to remain inactive when someone else wore it. However, it rejects others to the point of hurting them.” His expression was completely serious. “That is an action only taken by a being with a will of its own.”

“So you think so too?”

“What?”

His eyebrows rose in confusion, so she raised her right hand and snapped her bloodstained fingers to call him over.

"Come here. I think you'll like this."

She turned around and walked to her own desk.

It took only a few steps and the clock on the wall was approaching 4:10 AM. The time was likely drawing near.

"The night before I started the tests on Georgius, I set this up."

"Wh-what is it?"

"I'm hacking into the deepest depths of UCAT's databank. In other words, I'm illegally accessing the version of the Second Reference Room on the data servers. Only VIPs can view it and it contains the information on UCAT's blank period, the Concept Cores, and the National Defense Department." She smiled. "While investigating Georgius, I had some very limited access to that information in their examination room, so I used that as a way in from here. I have it set up to gather all the classified information at the core of the data servers."

Kashima reacted after a short pause.

"Director Tsukuyomi, you're betraying UCAT."

"Are you going to stop me?"

"No, I just wanted to say that. Oh, and if anyone asks, this means I tried to stop you."

She turned around in front of her desk and saw him shrugging his shoulders.

His expression softened and he sighed.

"This isn't just about Georgius, is it? You're trying to get information on the National Defense Department to help out Team Leviathan, aren't you?"

"Well, if I take all the information, there's sure to be some of that in there. And if I have it, I might as well hand it over to them."

And, she said to herself. *If I find data on UCAT's blank period, I'll learn about my husband.*

"…"

She decided to leave her sentimentality until later and switched on the deactivated display.

●

Tsukuyomi looked toward the newly lit-up monitor.

A black window filled the screen and had several symbols and words scrolling across it.

Kashima smiled bitterly when he saw it.

"You're using our hacking software 'Genius Hacker Girl – Gomez'? That's the nastiest one, but it's a pain to use because all the settings are done with text commands."

"Yes, but it can do the most and it's pretty smart. When the development department was reorganized, some idiot went too far in a demonstration hoping to increase our budget."

"They hacked into a certain country's databank, checked to see if their Secretary of State wore a hairpiece, and added a protector to keep the data from being altered. They did it all without being noticed, but it caused a small commotion in that country when UCAT Director Ooshiro checked to make sure it was accurate."

"It's a good thing that country had a sense of humor. When the Secretary of State was giving his official response to the accusations, he said he would reveal their nation's greatest secret and then removed his hairpiece."

"I hear Gomez has been upgraded a few times since then."

"This is Version 4. After all the work I've put into it, she's like a child to me." Tsukuyomi pointed at the screen. "Anyway, this is a map of the area around the protectors on the strictest portion of Japanese UCAT's servers. We set up the foundations of this ten years ago, so we should be able to break through it even if I don't know what kind of modifications the UCAT Director has added since."

A pursuit at the speed of electricity was unfolding in the server space shown on the screen.

The hacking program would access the areas it had access to and attempt to continue deeper. Sometimes it would delete data, use that as a hole to plunge deeper, and restore the original data so as to cover its trail.

However, the firewall working to cut off the hacking program was also well made. It would constantly check for illegal access, but the scope of that checking would expand or contract so as not to put a burden on the server's main functions. While tracking the hacking program's movements, it would also work to detect the origin point of the illegal access.

The hacking program recorded every point it passed through and constantly recalculated the shortest route to use on its way back.

The destination of that route was the origin point in question.

Recording that route was much like a homing instinct.

If captured, that origin point could be checked, so the hacking program would destroy itself in case of capture.

The pursuit continued in the electronic world where a single touch meant it was all over.

The standard setting Tsukuyomi had used was to prepare a single hacking program to reach the core of the servers and to send out a great number of dummy programs.

Too many dummies could trigger an emergency where all the servers shut down, so the number of dummies was monitored in real time and new ones were sent out with randomly set destinations.

“From the looks of it, a few million dummies have already been sent out and then destroyed.”

“It says here seven dummies have been captured.”

“Those ones had their origin point set to the general affairs and security divisions. This’ll cause them some problems, so we need to secretly give them some nice equipment.”

“I’d feel guilty if they thanked us for it, so let’s send it anonymously. …But what happens if they capture a dummy from our territory?”

“It’ll say Atsuta’s machine was doing it, so there’s nothing to worry about. If someone comes by, boot up his machine and deal with it. I’ll pretend to play a game or something.”

“Atsuta’s machine has the Heart Sutra for the wallpaper. Do I really have to boot that up?”

“Give it your best shot,” she said with a sigh.

Suddenly, the image on the screen changed.

The black window displayed a straight vertical corridor. The corridor was drawn with two green lines and looked like a cross section of a straw, but it was an abstract image representing the digital world.

“Here we go. It’s on the path to the core.”

The green lines were ten centimeters apart and the blue line indicating the hacking program was falling between them.

“That blue line is long. Are you sure you don’t have it recording too much of its route? How optimized is it?”

“I want it to take a few detours to lose pursuit on its way back.

This was the limit.”

Several yellow lines cut across the green corridor to block the way.

Those were the firewall, but the blue line broke through them in an instant and continued on down.

The blue line opened a console and asserted its presence.

“I’m 2nd-Gear.”

Red dots flew up from below to intercept it, but it fired light blue dots and curves that destroyed all of the red dots.

“I see you’ve given it more attack programs. It only had the blaster and zapper when I was working on it.”

“That was to avoid a barrage, so it had to be flashy as well. Personally, I enjoyed it more back when you could still grasp the location of all the bullets.”

“The times are changing. I don’t like saying it like that, though.”

As they spoke, the blue line scattered light blue dots around itself as options.

An especially thick yellow line formed a door down below and one light blue dot flew over and destroyed it.

At that point, the screen suddenly went dark.

They had left the corridor, so the corridor opened like an upside down funnel and then formed a circle.

The blue line had entered a large circular space.

“This is the core.”

Enough red dots filled that space to completely cover the screen and a white sphere sat at the very center.

The blue line paid no heed to the red dots. It fired the light yellow dots while slipping past the mass of red dots to access the empty space beyond. That was a spot of safety, a place where no one would attack it, and a location where it could view all.

It circled around to check on the white sphere in the center.

The sphere was about five centimeters across and the entire circular space was about thirty centimeters across.

“That isn’t a space you want a fight in.”

As if to check on that space, the blue line circled the entire space while slipping past the pursuing red dots.

It finally arrived at a location ten centimeters directly below the white sphere.

“What will it do?”

As if to answer Tsukuyomi’s question, light came from the blue line.

A blue dotted line extended from the front of the blue line and toward the white sphere in the center.

That dotted line represented the predicted access route and a window opened for just a moment.

“Go ahead? Y/N.”

But they did not even have to press a key because the development department’s program was autonomous.

“Y”

A moment later, the blue line raced into the darkness.

As it did, the mass of red dots pursued.

The wave of red surged toward the blue line’s destination and the blue line threw light blue dots out like a spray to intercept.

The light blue spray cancelled out the red dots.

The silent disappearance of the two created an open space and the blue line continued into that darkness while showing no sign of turning back.

The red group arrived and more light blue splashed out at them.

The red and light blue vanished and the blue line continued forward through the darkness.

That collision and cancellation of color continued at high speed.

As it produced the instantaneous sprays of light blue, the blue line broke through the center of their afterimages.

That line raced toward the white sphere. Once it reached a distance of 64 pixels, the red group changed its tactic.

It formed a wall.

The red group realized it could not predict the blue line’s actions, so it tried to surround the white sphere and prevent access from any position.

In other words, UCAT’s core was being completely cut off.

The expected result of this action was displayed on the screen with a note in parentheses.

“Emergency (of the awkward variety).”

The server was being shut down.

The firewall represented by the group of red had determined that shutting its own system down was the only way to protect itself.

The wall of red approached completion, but the blue line did not hesitate.

It continued on its predicted path below the white sphere because that was the shortest route from its current position.

The line cut through the darkness in an instant and approached the red group attempting to set up a wall.

“!!”

It danced.

It quickly travelled to the all access points around itself and fired its attack programs around as it did so to make the red wall collapse.

The light blue spray collided with the red.

Without even checking on the progress of that attack, the blue line rebounded straight up toward the white sphere.

Just as it arrived, text appeared on the screen.

“Mission complete!”

The blue line fired a light blue line from either side of its body and those two lines formed a protective corridor that repelled the red group.

The blue line began quickly taking data from the white sphere and the light blue corridor displayed the rate of destruction at different points.

“It should hold up long enough to transfer out the data!”

Tsukuyomi watched the indicator on the monitor. A window divided into 100 segments slowly but surely informed her of the data transfer rate.

She gave the program further instructions.

“Skip the core’s dummy data!”

“Select option: call keyword.”

“What keyword should I use to trigger a skip?”

She thought for a moment, but Kashima reached over to the keyboard.

“18+.”

As soon as he hit enter, the speed of the indicator shot up. The blue line was no longer reading the dummy data and was quickly extracting only the important classified information.

Tsukuyomi sighed toward Kashima as he watched the monitor.

“Not bad. …Wait. Why does the core contain mostly 18+ data!?”

“You were only supposed to download a few files, but now you’re downloading all of UCAT’s core data, aren’t you? Will it all fit on your machine?”

“Of course not.”

“But the development department server is directly linked to the other servers, so they’ll have no problem catching us if you put it there. What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry.” She nodded. “I’m encrypting it and sending it to every development department member’s machine. By my calculations, there should be enough space as long as I delete the unnecessary data on the machines.”

“I see. It is true our individual machines have our exclusive security on them, so no one outside the department can view them. …Wait, Director Tsukuyomi! My latest family movies are on my machine!!”

The monitor they watched displayed the layout of desks in the department. On the overhead map that displayed the partitions as white lines, Kashima’s desk was gradually filling with blue.

“Ahhh!!”

As he watched, his desk on the map grew entirely blue.

After a quiet chime, the data switched from his machine to the machine next to his.

“Ahh…” He fell to his knees. “I couldn’t protect my family…”

“C’mon, stop that. You need to distinguish between 2D and 3D.”

A moment later, noise filled the room.

The emergency alarm was going off.

“Eh?”

She checked the monitor, but the light blue corridor protecting the blue line had not been breached.

That meant the electronic battle inside the server had not been discovered.

…In that case…

“This must be something else.”

Kashima stood up and an announcement explained the situation.

“Um, sorry to interrupt all of you working the night shift, but, um, this is UCAT’s security department. An intruder entered the first floor and, um, the security department did not arrive in time to stop said intruder from moving further inside. Um, we would like to ask

all the standby members of the field operation department to assist."

Muttering voices could be heard in the corridor as some people began to take action.

They could be heard shouting to each other and equipping themselves as a further announcement arrived.

"Um, this is the security department. We have more information on the intruder. Um, she is a girl. I repeat, she is a girl. Her beauty has been ranked Class A. We have a beautiful girl accompanied by a large number of dogs. It is a truly moving sight. Even if you have nothing better to do, please remain where you are!"

The voices in the corridor grew oddly bright and the noises grew even louder.

Chapter 20

“Noisy Challenge”

That which causes commotions should not stay for long
It should remain on the move
Like a sudden rain shower

●

Shino walked down a white corridor.

This was her first time in UCAT and she was likely the first non-intelligence member of the Army to be there.

The intelligence department had used invisibility and silencing philosopher's stones to acquire the corridor layout down to UCAT's second basement. They had been unable to continue further down because the doors were too well-defended, but Shino's mission did not require continuing past those doors.

"Shiro."

She spoke toward the ground as she walked through the corridor.

A large white dog walked next to her there, but it was not alone.

The entire corridor was filled with dozens of dogs.

They came in countless varieties: small, large, white, black, brown, striped, spotted, raised ears, floppy ears, a prominent bridge of the nose, a lack of one, short legs, and long legs.

None of those many dogs cast a shadow on the floor. They all continually turned to look at Shino and walked along as if protecting her.

She met the gazes of the dogs protecting her from all directions and continued on.

"Thanks, everyone."

…I only travelled from Okutama Station to here, but I gathered so many.

She grabbed the philosopher's stone pendant hanging from her neck. The blue stone was glowing and that light used her will to give form to residual thoughts.

She did not know whether these could be called ghosts.

Even if the philosopher's stone allowed them to exist, there was nothing more to it than that.

Hajji had speculated that their loss had created a "gap" that functioned as a mold for their form. Shino's philosopher's stone was a type of thought synchronizing concept, so he said it might be sending their residual thoughts into that mold and casting a new form for them.

Shino recalled what else Hajji had said:

"Do you not have enough power to give form to humans or did you

set your specialty to dogs when you gave form to Shiro? Hm?”

She could now find the remnant wills of dogs, synchronize them with her philosopher’s stone, and allow them to touch objects other than her. When she did, most of them would be confused by being given a form and try to fight her. It was as if she were robbing them of their rest.

When that happened, Shiro would deal with them.

The dogs gathered here were the ones who had joined her and Shiro. She was their master and Shiro was their boss.

As she looked at all of them, she wanted to give them all food, but she could not.

“But we can go see your owners afterwards.”

She had promised to take them each to their former owners after they played together. When they met their former owners, their minds would reach their strongest point. The former owner would either see them for an instant or hear their cry before they disappeared.

Sometimes the former owner would have a new dog, but the dogs would always choose not to meet the owner in those cases. They would realize their appearance was an unneeded intrusion, but they would still lick Shino’s hand and disappear.

…Will that happen to Shiro someday?

But she had another thought as well.

…Where do they go when they disappear?

Did Low-Gear have a realm for the dead?

She had heard most of the other Gears did. 1st-Gear had Requiem Sense and 3rd-Gear had the Tartaros, but what about Low-Gear?

“If the concepts are released, will a realm for the dead be created?”

She tilted her head, Shiro looked at her worriedly, and the other dogs looked at her as well.

She was making them worry, so she smiled to tell them they did not have to.

She pulled a paper from her pocket. It was a map of UCAT’s second basement and she was on her way to the central hall.

“The northern wall has a communication line to the center of UCAT.”

With the map in one hand, she used the other to pull out a philosopher's stone on a string.

"Hajji got this weakened concept from 3rd-Gear. It transforms thoughts into information."

She wrapped the blue stone's string around her hand and lowered that hand. The dogs formed a circle around her and licked her hand and the stone it held.

As she let them lick her hand, she showed them the map.

"Okay, everyone. It's time to eat. Your food tonight is data. Once you've been turned to information, please eat everything you find deep in UCAT."

She took a breath, faced forward, and pointed.

"Go!!"

The group of dogs immediately took action.

They first raised their throats toward the heavens and opened their mouths in a howl.

Several dozen howls shook the white corridor and led to the next action.

As the sound came to an end, they ran.

"…!"

They sprinted along in an undulating line.

With a mission in mind, the dogs did not turn back toward Shino. They quickly formed groups of a few dogs each. Some groups continued straight and others suddenly cut through the walls.

Those information beasts ran through the white corridor and continued to run.

Shiro alone remained to await their return and to protect their master.

Shino watched as the final group disappeared into the wall.

"I hope they'll be okay."

She stopped walking and Shiro turned toward her after circling ahead. An unhesitating face lay beyond his sharp nose and he seemed to be telling her not to worry.

She nodded, smiled, gripped the philosopher's stone hanging from her neck, and opened her mouth.

The movements of her small lips produced a song.

Silent night, Holy night

God's Son laughs, o how bright
Love from your holy lips shines clear,
As the dawn of salvation draws near,
Jesus, Lord, with your birth
Jesus, Lord, with your birth

The majesty of that song passed through the stone and reached the dogs and their power of information. It encouraged them and told them their master was still there.

She heard answering howls in the distance.

The howls came from the corridor ahead, the intersections with other passageways, and from within the walls. They were responding to the song and their master's concerns.

Pushed on by their master's voice, the dogs' voices contained no fear.

To push them on even further, Shiro howled.

"————"

The bestial reverberation ruled the air.

Until, that is, another sound from directly ahead cut it off.

Several footsteps made by solid shoes and the clattering of metal equipment reached them.

…Here they are.

Shino prepared herself and Shiro bared his fangs.

"UCAT."

A moment later, that was exactly who arrived.

People charged out from the left and right at an intersection with another corridor up ahead.

They wore white armored uniforms and other white clothing. There were at least twenty of them and they must have known she had no projectile weaponry because they took up a position to block her path.

Those on the front line lowered their hips, held something in both hands, and peered into it.

…Weapons!?

She opened her mouth to complain that they were firing without giving a warning, but she realized she was being naïve. Instead, a shouted name escaped her opened mouth.

"Shiro!"

The dog lowered his front legs and shrunk back. Once he began, she knew several enemies would be scattered in an instant.

However…

“Okay! Target is in photographic range!!”

One extraneous word confused her.

“…Eh?”

The doubt in her heart caused Shiro to turn toward her in confusion.

At the same time, the enemy’s front line activated their weapons.

“…!”

She frantically prepared herself and heard a surprisingly reserved mechanical noise.

And nothing else happened. No bullets flew her way and no pain filled her body.

…Eh?

When she peeked forward between her fingers, she saw the enemy’s front line falling back and the second line stepping forward.

Finally, she noticed what their weapons were: cameras.

●

“Eh? U-um…”

She relaxed her posture and the retreating front line frantically turned toward her.

“Ah! Sh-she put her hands down! I couldn’t get a good shot of her face because her hands were in the way! Hey, second line. Give me another chance!”

One man tried to step forward, but the members of the second line forced him back.

“Don’t be stupid! This is the order we decided on using requests, recommendations, and official games of rock-paper-scissors! It’s your fault for thinking it’s best to have the first shot at it!”

“That’s right,” said one man who stood in front of all the others. “And by the third round, she’ll have gotten used to it, so the second round is what really matters.”

The old man wore a lab coat, the camera hanging from his neck had a telephoto lens the size of an anti-tank gun attached, and he was holding up his right thumb in Shino’s direction.

Shino knew him because he was well-known even within the

Army.

…Ooshiro Kazuo?

Her question must have passed through the philosopher's stone because Shiro tilted his head toward her.

She wondered what to do, but Ooshiro spoke before she found an answer.

"Yes, that is an excellent expression. Everyone, don't miss this once in a lifetime opportunity."

He lay on the floor and opened the bipod on the bottom of the telephoto lens to prepare the camera like a sniper rifle.

"Okay, let's go!"

"Eh? Um, okay."

Shino had Shiro sit down and straightened up as she heard the sound of the shutter.

Ooshiro smiled and stood up.

"Thank you very much. Third line, you're up!"

The third line frantically prepared their cameras and took photos.

"Okay, the three-line photo shoot is complete."

The entire group began to cheerfully leave, but Shino frantically spoke up.

"Um! I-is that really all you're doing?"

"Of course it is. We're off duty right now."

"Then where are those who are on duty?"

"The dogs arrived while they were gathering their equipment, so they had to deal with that too. With that extra work, I don't think they've managed to locate you yet. They're driving away the dogs while visually searching for you, but we decided to get what photos we could and then tell them where you are once we get back."

"Wh-why wouldn't you tell them right away!? I'm an intruder."

She had no idea why she was arguing, but Shiro gave a bark of agreement.

However, Ooshiro nodded with his giant camera resting on his shoulder.

"You are indeed an intruder and we're still UCAT members even while off duty," he said. "But everyone has their own job. The field operation group is currently running around in order to fight you, so we took the role of recording the intruder's actions while not getting in their way. But by some strange coincidence, we ran

across you before they did.”

Everyone around the old man applauded.

The comments of “nice excuse” and “you are the law” convinced Shino that this entire encounter had been put together by Ooshiro.

…The rumors about him were true.

It would not surprise her if he had sent false data to the other units just so he could take pictures of her.

“Then you don’t have any combat gear on you?” she asked just to be sure.

“Of course not. Nothing could be more disrespectful than worrying our model.”

I knew it, she thought with a sigh.

“What will you do if I attack you?”

“N-nonsense. Would an honest beauty like you really attack a group of defenseless people?”

He stood tall and opened his lab coat to demonstrate his defenselessness. *He looks like a flasher,* she thought, but the word “innocent” was written across the inside of his coat in ink.

Her shoulders drooped.

“Sorry, but please leave. I have serious work to do here,” she said. “A-also, don’t make a bunch of copies of those and spread them around.”

“You heard the model! No publishing these without permission!”

You were planning to? she realized. *I guess that’s just the kind of place this is. UCAT is a frightening place.*

Her shoulders drooped even further.

“Also, I want you to restate something.” She nodded and continued. “I don’t like simply being called a ‘beauty’, so please stop.”

“Ehhh!!?”

The entire group’s reflexive shout caused her to flinch back, but she quickly recovered.

“Wh-why are you so surprised!?”

“C-c-c-c-calm down! H-how about we start by defining our terms!?”

“Wh-what do you mean by defining our terms? I just don’t want to be called that!”

“No! What you want doesn’t matter here! It’s our fantasies that

matter! Isn't that right!?"

Shino smiled and immediately responded to Ooshiro's question.

"Sic him, Shiro!!"

The group of adults ran in a panic from the charging beast.

●

Two emotions filled the atmosphere of the development department room.

One was a rushing impatience and the other was the tension that caused.

The source of those emotions was Tsukuyomi's desk on the southern side of the room. Specifically, they came from Kashima as he watched the monitor and Tsukuyomi as she typed on the keyboard.

"What are these growing damaged areas that suddenly appeared?" asked Kashima as he peered at the monitor. "UCAT's data is being taken from the server!"

The amount of gray indicating inaccessible damaged clusters was growing on the data map. Those damaged regions had appeared in every direction and were growing as if drawing a line toward the white sphere of the core.

"Director Tsukuyomi, do you think this is the intruder's doing?"

"I would say so. The damaged regions appeared at almost the same time as the alarm sounded. …Uh, oh. It's approaching our line."

The white sphere and blue line were still safe, but the gray regions were drawing ever closer.

Kashima pulled the keyboard toward him and began typing.

"This damage is prioritizing the largest clusters of data, so wouldn't it work better to gather dummy data as bait rather than setting up a defensive wall?"

The red group that had attempted to block Tsukuyomi's program was attacking the damaged areas, but the red was overwritten with gray with no sign of resistance.

"It looks like the attack programs are being devoured as small pieces of data."

"Do we have a large enough amount of dummy data to work as bait?"

“Unfortunately, almost all of the unnecessary data on our personal machines was deleted. What about the family movies left on your laptop?”

“That is not unnecessary data. It is a necessary part of a military god’s life.”

“That’s quite a leap in logic. Anyway, what other unnecessary data is there?”

The two of them exchanged a glance, took a breath, and shouted out at the same moment.

“The 18+ games!!”

Kashima pointed toward the white sphere in the center of the monitor.

“Director Tsukuyomi, there’s a whole bunch right here! It’s a treasure trove!”

“Quit shouting and pointing and actually do something!”

Kashima gave his instructions to the program. As it continued removing data for itself, it created a secondary pathway to send massive amounts of dummy data toward the damaged regions.

The data transfer rate dropped, but the tremendous amount of data slowed down the expansion of the damaged region. Tsukuyomi and Kashima watched as file names scrolled by on their way to be destroyed. It looked like names on a war memorial and Kashima spoke in a serious tone as he read them.

“These are some unpleasant titles. Like this one: ‘Repeated School Year’. The tagline is ‘Be held back!’.”

“I don’t care. I’m more concerned by this one: ‘The Creator of Esperanto Was Named Zamenhof[1] (For Real)’. Its tagline is ‘Time to take over the world!’, but what is it even about?”

“Maybe this is actually a valuable collection.”

“Don’t say that with a straight face. More importantly, look at this-… Wait. Why are we reviewing the titles and taglines of 18+ games!?”

Her shout was accompanied by odd noises out in the corridor.

They heard footsteps and barking.

After a large group of footsteps passed by and gave various frightened shouts, a dog pursued them and a single set of quieter footsteps followed.

“What was that?” asked Kashima.

“How about you get out there and find out?”

The wall of dummy data was forming on the monitor.

“I don’t think we can gather all the core’s data before the dummy data is eaten through.”

However, Tsukuyomi was already listing their gathered data in a different window.

As she looked through the list of names, she smiled.

“It looks like we have a lot of data on the National Defense Department. There are even digitized photographs. Kashima, you find out what’s going on out in the corridor. I’ll have this tidied up and printed out by the time you get back.”

“And then I’m supposed to do something with it?”

“Yes. Fax or otherwise send anything that looks important to the group in Okayama. Use a convenience store or something, so the higher ups won’t notice.” She nodded. “Those children will want this information too.”

●

Shino faced the bad adults in the central corridor of the second basement.

She had run around quite a bit, but she had been generally making progress toward the exit. The enemy had met up with the field operation unit at an intersection between white corridors and they were catching their breath behind that unit.

…They’re holding the exit.

The dozen or so members of the field operation unit aimed guns at her. They aimed the guns directly at her and showed no sign of starting with warning shots. The middle-aged man with a commander-ish hat held a Hanshin Tigers megaphone in one hand.

“Um, can you hear me? We ask that you surrender peacefully.”

“I won’t.”

“Um, then can you give your name and affiliation?”

She was unsure whether she should tell them.

“My name is Shino. I am affiliated with…the Army.”

The unit stiffened at that name.

…That isn’t surprising.

UCAT and the Army had fought a few skirmishes limited to Japan and most of them had involved the theft of UCAT’s information,

materiel, and secrets. The Army viewed the battles as secondary and anyone who was captured was ordered to commit suicide.

…But most everyone returns without being captured.

This may have been close to the first time someone had directly faced them and named the organization.

She noticed the field operation unit, including the commander, was speaking with the camera group behind them.

"?"

She tilted her head and the commander turned toward her.

"What is your objective?"

"Are you not aware what's happening to UCAT's data servers right now?"

"We are aware."

His voice contained a tone of sadness which made Shino feel apologetic. However, she was also glad that the dogs were doing their job.

…I really am selfish.

But she knew her behavior had to remain resolute and she knew these were her enemies.

"Then please give up. No normal attacks can stop my dogs. If possible, could you open a path and let me through? If you do, I will tell the dogs not to attack you."

She poured strength into her words and prepared for an attack.

And…

"That expression is mine!!"

An ultra-long telephoto lens poked out from behind the enemy and she heard the sound of a camera shutter.

"No fair!!" shouted most of the enemy.

"I didn't give you permission to photograph me!!" she shouted.

"That's right. That's right," said the field operation unit as they grabbed the photo group by the collar.

"Listen up all of you," said a representative member of the unit. "Don't make us point a gun at a beauty while you have all the fun!"

"I-I said to stop calling me that. Is everyone in this organization a pervert!?"

They all turned toward her.

"You just don't understand your value! Go look in a mirror and think about what truly matters!"

“I-I don’t want that kind of value! Please stop taking pictures!”

Ooshiro held his telephoto lens and wriggled back and forth behind all the others.

“How…how could you rob an old man of his adorable hobby?”

“Shiro, Shiro. Target that guy first. Don’t hesitate to use your canines.”

“When did beauties become so cement-like!?”

“Just let me leave!!” she shouted. “Do you have a habit of imprisoning young girls!?”

…I need to move them out of the way so I can leave.

The dogs would catch up to her before long after the finished devouring the data and storing it in their bodies. Once she removed that from them and stored it in the philosopher’s stone, her mission would be complete. UCAT would lose most of its database and the Army would gain all that data.

…Let’s get out of this unpleasant world as soon as possible.

Even without the dogs, she could use her philosopher’s stone’s power to break into an opponent’s thoughts and make them do what she said.

“Please move out of the way,” she said to the stone hanging from her neck.

A moment later, the few people immediately blocking her path unsteadily stood up.

It had worked. The power of a philosopher’s stone was the same as a concept and there was no way to oppose a power that simply stated how things were.

“…”

She took a breath. As a few people moved to either side, the people behind them frantically spoke up.

“W-wait! You’re controlling them! Is this some kind of miraculous beauty power!?”

“This is not a beauty power! It’s a philosopher’s stone!!”

“Ehhh!?”

She ignored their shouts of protest and stepped forward.

Ooshiro immediately ran forward and held out both hands.

“You’re on!!”

“Please move out of the way.”

She sounded almost exasperated as she gave her order, but then

something like a crack ran between her and Ooshiro.

"Eh?"

She heard the sound of cracking glass and saw that Ooshiro had not moved.

She frowned at the fact that her philosopher's stone was not working.

"Please…move out of the way," she said while tilting her head.

Another crack ran through the air and a gust of wind blew through, but Ooshiro remained unmoved.

It was not working.

But as Ooshiro held his hands forward, his lab coat shook and a blue stone on a chain fell from his hand.

"Ha ha ha. Too bad. I thought it would be a good idea to bring a weakened copy of a concept that deflects everything."

"But…"

"I simply deflected your power. Why don't you try asking more nicely?"

"Please move out of the way!!"

Her shout produced another spatial crack and the bottom of Ooshiro's lab coat fluttered about. The surrounding soldiers were bent backwards and plastered to the wall with their skeletons creaking from the strain.

"Gwah! U-UCAT Director Ooshiro! We can't move out of the way any more than this!!"

"Just move out of the way!!"

"Gwaaaah!"

"You all seem to be having fun."

Ooshiro withstood her power head on.

His expression and stance showed just how calm he was.

…Huh?

She then realized something. If his reflection concept was related to the hands he held forward…

"Ah."

She pretended to casually look to the left where the wall contained a single door.

As soon as Ooshiro looked over as well, his stance shifted just enough to alter the angle of his defensive power and he was blasted diagonally to the right. He struck the wall and energetically rolled

two or three times.

"Ow! You need to treat the elderly with more care!"

"Please be quiet and let me leave!"

Shino ignored him and her shout silenced all of her opponents via the philosopher's stone.

She received the desired silence, but she had a thought about her shout.

…That isn't what an intruder should be saying.

She realized she was blushing and the adults crawled down from the wall, pressed their heads together, and began discussing something. A few of them would glance her way on occasion and about a minute passed.

Once they faced her again, all their faces displayed the same calm smile.

"Now, let's take this seriously. We aren't letting you leave tonight."

"Y-you sound like you're lying. Are you hiding something?'

"N-no. O-o-o-of course not. None of you are hiding anything, right?"

They all gave three quick nods and Shino came to the realization that adults were liars.

"Anyway, please don't move. I need to continue on and leave."

"Yes, yes. Keep going if you wish."

Ooshiro's tone of voice confused her, but she did not know why.

She tilted her head and Shiro suddenly turned back toward her.

"What is it, Shiro?"

He turned toward the right wall and Shino started to as well.

"Ahhh! Don't look at that wall!! It'll corrode your eyes away!"

She looked regardless and found a white wall with a placard on it.

The placard contained a green arrow pointing behind her and a single word below it.

"Exit," she read aloud.

…Did I get turned around while chasing them?

"Oh, um, that's where a man named Mr. Exit lives," said Ooshiro up ahead. "The…the real exit is this way! C'mon, this way!"

"Good! Bye!!"

With that staccato exclamation, she started to turn around.

She was more bothered by her own sense of direction than by

allowing them to trick her, so she decided to take some combat training in a closed space once she returned to the Army.

But as she turned around, she heard a voice from the exit leading up to the first basement.

It was a male voice and it was singing.

"A kissss exchanged innnnn the middle of the niiiiiight is a kiss of the niiiight!"

"He's here!" said someone behind her.

"Wh-what is this strange song!?"

"Our secret weapon. The weapon we wanted to keep a secret!"

●

Shino heard a singing voice.

As it continued, she stopped moving and watched as someone appeared from down the corridor.

"Yooouuuuu and meeeee in our hearrrrrrrts!"

A pause.

"Yeahhhhhhh!!"

The shout ended just as the young man stopped approximately three meters ahead.

Shino observed him.

He had short blond hair and wore a white summer coat.

He seemed to be hearing things because he spread his arms as if to quiet imagined cheering.

"There will be no encore. Not when I get a job the second I get back from the Sea of Japan."

Hearing that, Shino guessed who he was and breathed a sigh of relief.

He was most likely an ultra deep-sea fisherman from the coast of the Sea of Japan. The extreme loneliness of the sea had clearly caused him to go mad.

He glanced at her, Shiro, and the UCAT soldiers at the corridor intersection behind her.

"I'm here. It's Atsuta Yukihito of the development department's security team."

"Eh? You're not a deep-sea fisherman?"

"What are you talking about, brat?"

The young man named Atsuta frowned toward her and then

turned back to those behind her.

She could tell he was an enemy, but his general atmosphere prevented her from moving. He was perfectly relaxed, but she had no idea what he would do if she did anything.

She had felt this same oppression when facing Tatsumi in training.

Shiro lowered down next to her but did not let down his guard.

What should I do? she wondered just as Atsuta asked a question to his allies.

"So where's this supposed enemy? Bring them out here for me."

She followed his gaze in confusion and saw all those in the corridor intersection point at her.

Seeing that, Atsuta looked at her, paused, and then looked back at his allies.

"Are you stupid? This immature brat isn't an enemy! If you're gonna joke, at least put some effort into it. Hey, brat. I don't know where they scouted you from, but hanging around people with rotten brains will make your own brain melt out your ears."

"N-no. I…um…am the enemy."

"Don't be stupid, brat! Stop playing pretend, go home, and get some sleep!"

Everything he said irritated her.

He must have noticed the stern look on her face because he tilted his head.

"What? You got something to say to me, brat?"

That was when her self-control reached its limit.

She took in just one breath, clenched her lowered fists, and shouted back.

"I am not being stupid! And what is wrong with you!? Why do you keep calling me a brat!?"

"Shut up. You look like a brat, so I called you a brat. Isn't it summer break? Go get to sleep, head out for the radio exercise tomorrow morning, and get yourself a stamp for attendance!"

"Oh? You keep calling me a brat, but you're the one singing weird songs and hearing things. You're more of a child than I am. In fact, you're beyond saving! Also, the radio exercise wouldn't be tomorrow morning. It would be this morning because it's already past four in the morning! You idiot!!"

Her tirade received a response, but not from Atsuta.

The group behind her gasped and seemed to draw back in fear.

But she was no longer afraid and she stuck out her tongue before continuing.

"If you don't like it, then say something! You stupid adult!"

She saw the young man's eyebrows rise and he bared his teeth.

"Y-y-you…you…you…"

"Ohhh? Are you having trouble speaking? Heh heh heh. You double idiot!"

"I'll rape you, brat!!"

His shout pierced through her, but it took her a moment to realize what he meant.

The entire area grew silent and she thought amidst the absolute stillness.

What exactly did those words mean?

"U-um…"

Her knowledge came from newspapers and magazines. When she mixed that with the current situation, she started to feel faint.

Something fell from her eyes.

She momentarily thought about calling for help from Mikoku, but Mikoku was not here. She had to be strong.

She endured and slowly looked up at him while feeling new tears welling up in her eyes.

She had a single word to say to Atsuta's frowning face. She faced the ceiling, breathed in, and opened her mouth wide.

"Rapist!!"

"Y-you idiot! Don't take it literally!!"

"Wahhhhh!!"

"Don't cry!!"

But the next voice came from the corridor intersection.

"You bastard!!"

A thunderous voice was accompanied by countless guns being aimed.

"Atsuta! You've made one of this planet's most precious resources cry! But that expression is nice too!"

"Stop being so inconsistently perverted!" he shouted back. "Anyway, is she the enemy!?"

"You're the entire universe's enemy!!"

“Don’t be stupid! Do you want me to slice you all to pieces!?”

As Atsuta’s shout reverberated down the corridor a new man spoke up.

“Wait just a second. Listen up.”

Shino rubbed the tears from her eyes with both hands and turned around to find a young man in a lab coat and sandals jogging from the right side of the intersection.

“What are all of you doing?”

“Oh, Kashima. These idiots are treating me like their enemy for some reason.”

The young man named Kashima turned toward Ooshiro and sighed.

“UCAT Director Ooshiro, Atsuta always approaches combat seriously. I can’t imagine why you would need to aim your guns at him. There must have been some kind of mistake.”

“That’s right, that’s right. Tell that perverted old man how wonderful I am.”

Ooshiro nodded and gestured Kashima over.

Kashima leaned in and Ooshiro whispered in his ear.

He nodded a few times and then turned to Atsuta.

“That was a bad thing, Atsuta.”

“Don’t betray me that easily!”

“Keep it down!”

Shino saw yet another new person enter.

The door on the wall to the left slid open and a short girl stepped out.

She had long gray hair and a black cat at her feet.

Shino knew that her name was Brunhild and that she had been part of 1st-Gear’s main force during their battle with UCAT.

She looked first at the corridor intersection and then at Shino.

“Is it all of you causing all that noise?”

She clearly did not expect an answer because she frowned and spoke in a quick, irritated voice.

“I am seriously busy, so keep it down.”

Feeling scolded, Shino frantically spoke up.

“S-sorry.”

“Oh? Do you really think sorry is enough?”

The frowning face turned Shino’s way.

Oops, she thought. *My reflexive apology gave her an excuse to accuse me.*

Brunhild narrowed her eyes, tilted her head, and looked diagonally down at Shino.

“Do you want to know what I was doing?”

“N-not really.”

“I see.” Brunhild smiled. “I’ll tell you: I was working on my summer homework.”

Shino had heard that term before. She had never gone to school. The adults of the Army had given her a fair amount of professional knowledge, but she had only a little bit of knowledge on the customs of normal schools.

From what she had heard, summer homework was something everyone made a big deal out of yet always put off until the very end of summer break. People who finished it at the beginning of summer break were supposedly quite valuable.

And one such valuable person stood before her.

Her joy at meeting someone like that took the form of a question.

“Wh-what are you doing for your homework?”

That curious and interested question caused Brunhild to hold out her hand ten centimeters from Shino’s face to display what it held.

“Cicadas. I’m collecting insects.”

“…”

“I caught them yesterday evening. I just finished the preparations and was in the process of making specimens out of them. Do you know how that’s done? First, you inject an anesthetic into the end of their butt with a syringe. Once they stop moving, you inject a poisonous hardener into them, also through the butt. Then you stab a pin into the center like this.”

Shino gasped at the pierced stomach of the cicada.

“Don’t worry. I injected the anesthetic. But when I was injecting the hardener, the commotion out here caused the needle to go in at an angle and the hardener leaked out.”

“Eh?”

“It’s still alive.”

The cicada suddenly moved. Its six legs trembled and writhed about while it gave its chirping cry.

The sound of the bug made Shino step back.

“Nooo!!”

But Brunhild continued staring at her without so much as glancing at the cicada.

“I told you to keep it down.”

She pressed something hard against Shino’s forehead. It was slightly pointed, it moved, and it grasped painfully to her skin.

Once she thought about what it was, she just about passed out.

The cicada cries stopped and six sharp objects dug into her forehead.

She started hearing dog footsteps and barking in the distance and wondered if she was imagining things, but then another sharp pain reached her forehead.

As soon as she wondered what it was, Brunhild spoke.

“Oh, it’s sucking.”

Her instincts told her what was sucking, so she opened her mouth and her limbs tensed up.

“Cicadaaaaaa!!”

She screamed and dogs burst from the walls and ceiling.

The girl with the cicada prepared for a fight as the barking was accompanied by screaming adults and gunfire.

She threw the scalpel from her insect collection kit toward Atsuta.

“Sword god, make yourself useful!”

“You don’t have to tell me what to do!!”

Just as Atsuta caught the blade, Shiro began to move, and paper flew from Brunhild’s sleeve.

It was explosive paper.

A swordfight and explosion began.

●

The moon was visible as the night approached dawn.

The third quarter moon was already floating in the west at a height that indicated morning was near.

A woman stared at that moon.

She stood next to a white building atop a small mountain near a wide, flat city.

She wore white sleepwear and stood on an elevator at eight stories up. She was leaning on the railing and looking at the moon,

but she suddenly stopped.

She lowered her gaze to the city.

“Kurashiki. It’s weird to think I can see it but they can’t see us.”

Night came early for that historical city, but its mornings seemed normal. The moon was out and the 3rd-Gear clock said it was early dawn, but…

“There aren’t many lights on.”

That flat city was not filled with agriculture and had no harbor, so the people there worked to protect history and preserve their city.

…But they’re still living a life that faces the present.

“How preachy,” Miyako muttered self-deprecatingly as she looked into the sky.

When she had decided to remain that evening, Moira 1st and Gyes had given her two pieces of information to give her a chance to rethink that decision.

She turned her thoughts toward one of those two.

“I’m from 2nd-Gear.”

Her mother had never said a word about that.

According to Moira 1st, she had likely been naturalized and a lot of 2nd-Gear had joined Low-Gear once the Concept War came to an end. She had also mentioned that Tsukuyomi was the surname of 2nd-Gear’s imperial family.

“Heh.”

…So I am a princess.

She didn’t like it and Gyes had gone on to say the following:

“According to some information we have received, a woman named Tsukuyomi works as the development department director at the Tokyo branch of UCAT, Low-Gear’s anti-Concept War organization and our enemy.”

“That would definitely be my mom,” she had replied.

…What is with this? I was finally onboard and spoke so harshly, but it turns out I’m not from Low-Gear and my mom’s a leader in the enemy organization.

Moira 1st and the others had asked her to decide by the next morning whether she would leave or stay.

She thought about the ever-changing situation and began to sing a song.

“Silent night, Holy night.”

What a memorable song, she thought.

On the last night she had spent with her father, the family had sung that song.

She would occasionally sing it to remember that time.

Her mother had instead avoided singing it, but she had suddenly started humming it again during May. It had started when her mother had stayed overnight at IAI for a "party" and come back with a hurt back.

What happened to her then, Miyako wondered.

She then gave another self-deprecating laugh.

"Heh. First that interview and now I can't figure myself out."

…And I don't know anything about others.

"You're far from being an adult, Miyako."

As soon as she muttered that into the sky, she saw a light.

The pale light resembled moonlight, but it had not come from the sky.

"Inside!?"

The pale light was moving through the dim corridor visible through the emergency exit behind her.

It had a human form.

…A woman?

The woman emitted a pale light and long hair of the same color rippled through the air as she climbed down the stairs next to the emergency exist.

She's not human, realized Miyako.

After all, humans did not glow and the background could not be seen through them.

"And can they make that face?"

She saw a face with the ends of the eyebrows lowered. The mouth was crumbled as if weeping and the eyes were powerless as if searching for something.

If she were human, she would be wailing, thought Miyako. *Her expression looks like it's frozen in the instant before crying.*

But if she was not human, what was she?

A ghost? she guessed before shaking her head.

When Moira 1st had told her about 3rd-Gear the day before, she had mentioned the Tartaros Machina. People's souls were wholly brought inside, but a specified person could not be called out.

That meant there were no ghosts of individual people.

"Then what is this?"

She stood up from the elevator railing, but the glowing woman was no longer visible even at the bottom of the stairway. She knew that stairway led to the hangar down below.

Wondering if she should go check, Miyako remembered something.

"Wasn't that the woman in the framed paintings in the hallway?"

…Artemis?

That was Apollo's sister.

Was she inside this base in some form or another?

"Or am I so tired I'm hallucinating?"

She brought a hand to her forehead and found sweat.

That dampness and her cold forehead told her she had seen the truth.

And then noise came instead of light.

A shout reached her from below.

"——————!!"

The shout was in a mechanical voice and it came from the entrance to the hangar. It seemed to shake even the light leaking from the cracked-open door and it sounded almost bestial.

…That was a scream.

The high-pitched scream continued from below.

She recognized it as Typhon's shout, but she did not know why Typhon would be raising its voice now.

What was going on?

She tried to listen more closely, but the scream shook her spine.

"Kh."

An unpleasant feeling twisting deep in her gut sent her inside.

The red carpet felt pleasantly soft below her feet and the scream from the hangar entrance vanished.

When she realized it was not coming from the bottom of the stairway, she breathed a sigh of relief.

With that warm breath, she leaned against the wall.

…What was that scream?

It had already vanished and she did not hear a second one.

That relieved her even further, but at the same time…

…Sorry.

Either because she had seen that pale glowing woman's expression or because she understood Typhon's scream, she wanted to do something about it.

"Dammit."

She held her right hand before her eyes.

"Dammit!"

She clenched her left hand and struck the wall.

She realized once more how conceited she was. During the day, she had given the maids names and been surrounded by them. During the evening, she had spoken with Apollo. After that, she had felt she understood them to a certain extent.

…But I don't.

She decided to stay here. Tomorrow, she would eat breakfast and head to the hangar. There, she would face Typhon fair and square while the others worked.

"Dammit…"

As she spoke, she realized a sound lingered in her ears: Typhon's scream.

The intensity of that scream had rivalled the yellow she had seen in Typhon's eyes.

"Kh!"

She covered her face with her outstretched hand and recalled the young man with the same color eyes as Typhon.

What would he do if he heard that scream that had the same intensity as his eyes?

And who had caused Typhon to cry out like that?

…Was it not Apollo?

Moira 1st had said he was the only human in the base, which meant he was the only one who could pilot Typhon.

But who had that woman been?

…Typhon screamed after she went down there.

But she shook her head. An actual body was needed to pilot a god of war. That woman's body had been made of light and she had not even created footsteps.

In that state, she could not cause anything to move.

"What is going on? I thought this was the land of machines."

She considered asking Apollo, but she shook her head.

She would wait until tomorrow.

She would then head to the hangar and find the truth there.

“That rich boy wouldn’t give me a straight answer even if I asked him.”

---

[1] The “Zamen” of Zamenhof is spelled the same as “semen” in Japanese.

Chapter 21

“Silently Read Memories”

Someone said to go outside
What did so before you could respond?
Your thoughts, your gaze, or your advancing feet?

●

Below the blue morning sky was a dark blue expanse that reflected the sunlight and rose and fell with waves.

It was the sea, but this sea did not continue to the horizon.

Beyond the ships and water birds was an opposite shore and bluish-gray mountains.

A voice flew toward that sea.

“The Seto Inland Sea!”

The female voice belonged to Kazami.

Her voice came from a wharf sticking out into the sea. A few dozen people were gathered on the concrete harbor and Kazami stood in the lead while holding a wheelchair’s handles.

The wheelchair carried a girl with long blonde hair across the wharf.

That girl, Mikage, looked up toward Kazami, opened her mouth, and spoke with silent words.

“Ee ehoh ihluh ee?”

“That’s right,” replied a smiling Kazami. “The Seto Inland Sea.”

Mikage nodded and looked behind the other girl.

Two boys stood there: Izumo and Hiba. The latter gave Kazami an impressed look.

“Kazami-san, you sure have gotten close to Mikage-san.”

“We’ve been together since last night, including the bus, helicopter, and train rides coming here. Are you jealous, Hiba?”

“I am, Chisato. I’m worried you’re going to awaken to a love that crosses the gender barri- gfh.”

Kazami ended the unnecessary comment prematurely and glanced around.

The ones waiting for a ship on the wharf and harbor were Team Leviathan and the members of the special and standard divisions that often worked with them.

The training camp was taking place on a desert island and they had already travelled from Okutama to Okayama UCAT by helicopter and from there to Kurashiki by train.

They had arrived at the Port of Mizushima on the southwestern side of the Kojima Peninsula, but it was not a fishing harbor. It functioned as an industrial transportation harbor and it was

reachable on a train from Kurashiki. The industrial area was used by many corporations such as Mitsubishi.

"The Izumo Company has apparently been using this since the early days of the Izumo Aviation Institute."

From what Kazami's father had told her, the area had been an even greater shipbuilding area than Yokosuka during World War Two.

She turned to Hiba, then to Mikage, and finally to the western sea.

"That's Kure, Hiroshima over there. During the National Defense Department days, warships like the Yamato were built there."

"They build passenger ships and tankers now, don't they?"

"Oh, do you know a lot about this, Hiba? Do you like this kind of thing?"

"No, but my grandfather does. Back in the National Defense Department days, the military apparently asked them to share some technology for a giant warship. They planned a warship that flew and fired a destructive beam from the bow, but the military thought they were joking and rejected it."

They were probably serious, thought Kazami. *If the plans still exist, my dad could probably use it for something.*

Mikage then lifted her body up to look at Hiba.

Kazami guessed that Mikage had not heard that story and that she wanted to hear as much from Hiba as she could.

The night before, they had spoken together and Kazami had occasionally let Mikage handle the calls to Hiba, so she could now understand what the girl was thinking to a certain extent.

…But I'm probably not as good at it as I think I am.

She had been woken early that morning by the sounds of Mikage attempting to leave the room on her own.

Kazami's current mood would change based on whether that was due to Mikage's desire to see Hiba or a desire to get away from her.

I can't let my guard down, she thought. *Mikage has her own thoughts. As long as I don't hastily read too much into her actions, I'll get my answer eventually.*

Suddenly, Hiba glanced around.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Sayama-san or Shinjou-san

since Kurashiki Station."

"Oh, those two couldn't resist any longer and they can't exactly do it in front of us, now can they?"

"…What?"

"It happens a lot."

Kazami beckoned Hiba over. After Mikage tilted her head and Hiba walked over, Kazami crouched down, placed a finger over her mouth, and gestured for Hiba to lower down as well.

"?"

He lowered his head and Kazami reached into his collar and toward the wheel of Mikage's wheelchair.

She searched around with her hands for a bit.

…There they are.

When she pulled out two small devices about the size of a grain of rice, Hiba mouthed a word much like Mikage would.

"A uhg?"

A bug?

Kazami nodded, quickly opened the backpack she wore, and pulled out a handheld recorder much like the one Sayama owned. She switched it on and Hiba whispered a comment on the sound it produced.

"Kazami-san, what is this sound of flesh and bones being struck?"

"Shh. Sayama edited this four hour selection of my attacks. For the moment, it'll sound like I'm hitting Kaku."

She placed the bugs in a small pill case she took from her backpack and placed it back in along with the activated recorder.

She tossed the backpack toward Izumo who lay collapsed on the ground. It made a dull noise as it struck his face, so it must have had some kind weapon inside. She decided not to think about it and took a breath.

"Now then, let's talk seriously."

"Sounds good. …Wait. Why were we bugged!?"

"Not so loud, Hiba. This isn't a simple matter. There are people who are interested in our actions, so they asked to have us monitored. Probably from the other side of the sea." Kazami pointed at Hiba's collar and Mikage's wheelchair. "They must have been slipped onto you during the body check before boarding the helicopter. I'll put them back on you, so we need another way to

eliminate them. Hiba, when disembarking from the ship later, purposefully fall into the ocean and change your clothes. Mikage, you try to use your cane instead of the wheelchair. Also make sure to check your tent every day."

Hiba frantically nodded and Kazami smiled when Mikage emulated him. Hiba had plenty of combat experience and Mikage had a long past, but their one-on-one battles had not prepared them for this kind of tactic.

…I actually feel like an upperclassman for once.

"So where are Sayama-san and Shinjou-san?"

"After leaving the helicopter at the Okayama IAI branch, Sayama received a phone call, remember?"

"Yes. A group called the Army attacked UCAT and escaped. Shouldn't you all head back there? I heard most of the internal data was destroyed."

"They targeted the central data server, so the servers of individual departments were unharmed. It seems transferring over the data from those servers will recover most of it. In fact, the IT department was glad to get a new backup from everyone. A lot of the departments don't bother with periodic backups to the central server because it's too much trouble."

"Then what was the enemy after?"

"Well," said Kazami while narrowing her eyes. "Do you really think UCAT's databank had nothing but backup data from the different departments?"

"Eh?"

"Also, that phone call to Sayama wasn't from an official UCAT contact. It was a secret message from 2nd-Gear's military god in the development department."

Kazami intentionally emphasized their connection to other Gears.

…I don't really like showing off our strength.

But they needed to demonstrate their past results.

She saw Hiba's expression stiffen a bit and the look in Mikage's eyes changed.

"What did that military god say?"

"Something very interesting. His boss had saved the majority of the data from the central server. She acted ahead of time and copied over everything the Army would want to steal and destroy."

“But how did-…?”

Kazami cut him off with a shake of the head.

“It’s rude to ask that. Anyway, it contained a lot of documents concerning the National Defense Department, including some image data. The military god was instructing Sayama to pick up the important documents by fax so the higher ups won’t notice. He’s probably waiting by a convenience store fax machine near Kurashiki Station right now.”

“Then the idea that he and Shinjou-san went off to do dirty things was just camouflage?”

“Well…” Kazami trailed off in thought, looked up toward the sky, and gathered her thoughts. “That might not be a complete lie.”

●

Kurashiki was located a bit west of Okayama’s center.

It was somewhat west of the Kojima Peninsula that stuck out into the Seto Inland Sea.

The city was a twenty minute train ride from the prefectural capital of Okayama. To the south of that northeast-southwest railroad were museums and a sightseeing district known as the Bikan district which was filled with antique houses. To the north were an amusement park and a flat, seemingly never-ending residential district.

Kurashiki Station was located in the center of the city, a hotel was situated above the station building, and department stores were connected to either side.

Outside the southern entrance of the station was a large roundabout made with tourists in mind and major roads led away from it in three different directions.

The central street was primarily lined with bars, business hotels, and restaurants. Convenience stores were located between the different stores and restaurants.

Two people stood in front of a convenience store with a blue sign on the left side of the road. One was a boy wearing a vest and suit pants. The other was a boy wearing a white shirt, shorts, and a white straw hat.

The summer sun shined down as noon approached, so the two of them stood in the shade of a tree and out of the way of the walking

people.

The one in the straw hat looked to the backpack carried by the one in the vest.

“Sayama-kun, you’ve been carrying that for me this whole time. Isn’t it heavy?”

“Ha ha ha. This bag contains your binder, Shinjou-kun. That would never feel heavy to me.”

“I put Izumo-san’s spare sunglasses in it because they wouldn’t fit in his bag.”

“So that’s why the right side seemed oddly heavy. Is there a trashcan around here?”

“Um…” Shinjou thought and looked at her watch to change the subject. “S-Sayama-kun? It’s 11:55 right now, so we have five minutes until Kashima-san told us to call him. Have you taken care of the bugs?”

“I have. It will only last about 90 minutes, but that should be enough.”

Sayama pulled out a clear plastic case from the backpack’s side pocket.

It contained two listening devices and Sayama’s portable recording device. That combination made Shinjou tilt her head.

“Will that really work?”

“It will. I am playing a dummy conversation I edited together.”

He raised the volume of the recorder so she could hear.

“I-I can’t handle something th-that hard!”

“We are running short on time. You seem extraordinarily interested in this. Anyway, there is no need to be afraid. Ask for it hard and rough!”

“I know I said that…but…”

“Now, then. Continue, Shinjou-kun. …Hm? Why did you just twitch?”

Sayama turned a serious expression toward Shinjou.

“Such a wonderful editing job. Now, do you see a problem with this, Shinjou-kun?”

“I see one in your brain!! …Wait. You aren’t recording everything I ever say, are you?”

“Unfortunately, that proved impossible as we first met and spoke inside a concept space where batteries did not function.”

Shinjou suddenly felt faint and collapsed to her knees, so Sayama's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, no. Are you anemic, Shinjou-kun? Is there a restaurant that serves liver sashimi around here? No, we must not act like a carnivorous couple. A better option would be-…"

"U-um, try to calm down before you jump to too insane a conclusion. Let's focus on a more pressing issue."

She stood up with a hand on her forehead, frowned, and tilted her head.

"Have you been playing that for the bugs this whole time?"

"Of course. The bugging team of UCAT's special division is likely listening to their headphones with meek looks on their faces. But do not worry. If they attempt to make unauthorized copies or to sell it, I intend to sue them for copyright infringement."

This is hopeless, realized Shinjou. *Maybe I should have been more prepared.*

She could only sigh, but after a second sigh, she managed to speak.

"Well at any rate, you go do what you have to, Sayama-kun."

"Why are you waving your hand as if trying to banish me to the convenience store?"

"Oh, um… It just came out that way for some reason."

She checked her watch and saw it was exactly noon. He checked his own watch, placed Baku back in his breast pocket, and faced the convenience store.

"If possible, I hope to receive some information concerning the Shinjou in the National Defense Department," he said suddenly.

Shinjou gave a small gasp as he spoke with a straightforward look despite not facing her.

…He actually thought about it.

She was happy, but she cleared her throat to indicate her next comment was what she felt she *should* say rather than what she *wanted to* say.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, but you can't prioritize me. You have to prioritize everyone."

He gave a bitter laugh, nodded, and turned his expressionless face her way.

"I am well aware. For one thing, information on the National

Defense Department should also include information on the mountain ape with the same surname as me. I must eliminate the more disgraceful parts before anyone sees them."

"I think that's wrong for a different reason…"

"I see. At any rate, I hope we can learn something from this. Both about our relatives and about 3rd-Gear."

He turned toward a cloth wrapper attached the backpack's side with a band. It contained the sword Gyes had given them while promising to speak with them.

"We're supposed to place that where we think 3rd-Gear's base is, right? Do you have any ideas?" she asked.

"I have a general idea. When we arrived here, I heard about that attack by the Army that the old man referred to as the 'delightful beauty invasion', but he also mentioned a piece of information he heard from Brunhild-kun."

"From Brunhild-san? Why does she know about 3rd-Gear?"

"The headquarters of 1st-Gear's city faction were around here. It seems they clashed in the past and 3rd-Gear moved afterwards. When 1st-Gear's recon team visited the area again, nothing was left."

"But that makes it even harder to know where they are. If they were still in their original position, we could at least make a guess using the Divine States-World Interaction Theory."

"Predicting the destination of someone who has gone missing can be quite fascinating and teach you a lot. And that includes your parents, Shinjou-kun. So let's take it easy for now. I want to think about some things."

"What things?" asked Shinjou.

"The second impurity the Hiba boy will not reveal to us, for one."

Shinjou recalled the previous morning. Sayama had been oddly forceful while speaking with Hiba and he had negotiated with Gyes afterwards.

"Did you realize anything after those discussions yesterday?"

"I did. Last night, I was thinking in the bath before you arrived, and…"

"You suddenly lost all credibility…"

"Just listen. Yesterday morning, I asked the Hiba boy why Apollo had switched to piloting Typhon when he had previously used a pale

blue god of war."

"Yes, and he told you he doesn't know why."

"That he did, but he did not deny that Apollo had switched from one god of war to Typhon. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Ah," gasped Shinjou as she recalled what Gyes had said. "Gyes said it is impossible to negotiate with Typhon's pilot, that they utterly reject that option, and that anyone who knows the secret will bear an impurity."

"Yes, but Apollo is alive. So why is it impossible it negotiate? Why do they utterly reject it? And why would that lead to bearing an impurity? I think all these mysteries can be narrowed down to a single point: why did Apollo switch gods of war? I already have a theory, but I lack evidence."

He seemed certain, so Shinjou believed him. When he spoke with confidence, it could often cause problems, but he was never outright wrong. This naturally led to her next comment.

"You're amazing, Sayama-kun."

He narrowed his eyes, nodded, and let out a charming sigh.

"That is the ultimate compliment, Shinjou-kun. …From the Hiba boy's behavior, I think he feels he has already lost his chance to tell us."

"Then…" Shinjou chose her words carefully. "Is it like when I wasn't sure I could reveal the truth about myself?"

"Yes. He is likely an incredibly nice person, so he seems to hesitate too much out of concern for others. He views everything as an imposition on others. Mikage-kun's presence is also holding him back," he said. "Do you think he ever has her comfort him?"

She could not immediately reply.

She thought about what he meant and applied the concept to the two of them.

…Ah.

She realized he was referring to when he would rest in her lap.

…He won't use my lap unless he's injured saving me or he beats me at cards.

When he felt he was in a position to freely ask for it, he would show his need for comfort.

"I wonder if Ryuuji-kun is the same?" she thought aloud. "Is he comforted by Mikage-san who can't evolve, speak, or walk?"

“I am certain Mikage-kun would gladly do so, but I think he would hesitate to ask. He would at least subconsciously view it as placing a greater burden on her and he would deem that as arrogant,” said Sayama. “But there are times when he can accept that comfort without guilt.”

“Eh?”

Shinjou looked up and he smiled back at her.

“And that is connected to his reason for fighting. The question is whether he has realized it or not.”

“Does he really have times like that?”

“He does. Everyone does.”

“Really?”

She did not know the answer.

She felt she had Sayama comfort her too much.

Even being with him now was a part of that.

“I think only a small portion of people ever have that desire for comfort met,” she said.

“Really?”

He tilted his head and she saw something like doubt in his usual lack of expression.

He appeared unsure whether he should say something or not.

Finally, he brushed up his hair, raised his right hand, and began by calling her name.

“Shinjou-kun, there was once a certain automaton.”

“Eh?”

This sudden comment brought only confusion to Shinjou, but she quickly realized he was actually thinking for once.

She did not know what he meant or who this automaton was, but she understood what it was he desired. He wanted someone to listen to his answer, so she spoke up.

“U-um… What about this automaton? Will you tell me, Sayama-kun?”

“I will.”

He took a breath, looked away from her, and continued.

“That automaton was quite foolish.” He paused for a beat. “For some reason, she was set to destroy herself and yet made no attempt to change that. Even when her master asked that she change that setting, she refused with a smile.”

"…"

He remained expressionless, but looked up in the air, brushed up his bangs, and chose his words carefully.

"Perhaps troubling and worrying her master in that way was her way of being comforted."

And…

"Everyone is comforted in their own way. And that is exactly why everyone has some way or another."

He let out a small sigh, tightened his tie, and regained his usual expressionless look. It was as if his previous words had never been spoken.

"Well, most of what I said is speculation and the person in question is not with us. You can ignore it."

"I don't want to," said Shinjou.

She could tell the ends of her eyebrows had lowered and a small smile crept onto her lips.

…What happened to #4 really bothered him.

On the other hand, she had almost forgotten about it.

"I appreciate that you talk about that kind of thing from time to time."

"Then we truly are opposites, Shinjou-kun. I view it as a horrible failure."

He spat out the words and did not look her in the eye, but he soon hurriedly looked at his watch.

"It is time."

"Oh, you're right. We can leave it at that."

"What a disagreeable tone you have there."

"We really are opposite. I wasn't being disagreeable. I just thought you were being oddly…"

She thought.

"Funny and amicable. What would that combination be in the Sayama language? And if you just combine 'fu' with 'cable' without thinking what it sounds like, I won't take a bath with you for a while."

"…"

"Y-you don't have to think about it so seriously."

"I see. But that proves you do not view it as all that important. I would prefer it if you forgot I said anything."

She stuck her tongue out in response and he merely smiled bitterly.

If she had the chance, she decided to bring up that sort of thing herself next time.

Meanwhile, Sayama took a step toward the convenience store.

“Please wait here, Shinjou-kun. Afterwards, we can take a walk as we gather our thoughts. How about looking around the Bikan district?”

“The others will complain if we’re late. We need to set up the tents and the stove.”

“Our athletic couple can handle the sweaty work like that. We can buy a souvenir that will make them forget.”

He took a few steps and passed through the automatic door to the convenience store. Seeing the door open as if avoiding him made Shinjou smile.

She watched through the glass as he walked inside and spoke to the clerk.

…The Bikan district, hm?

When he had mentioned visiting Kurashiki, Kazami had been jealous. It was an old city and some old areas remained. Those areas had been preserved and turned into sightseeing areas.

…A normal girl would be happy to be taken somewhere like this.

She reached into her shorts pocket and pulled out the Okayama sightseeing booklet she had secretly bought. When she had bought a swimsuit with Kazami, she had asked the girl for advice and she had added some labels to the booklet based on her response.

She had thought the training schedule would leave no time for fun, so arriving in Kurashiki so suddenly was quite fortunate. The Bikan district page had a label attached and this backing from Kazami allowed her to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Maybe I can let him comfort me a little more,” she muttered.

A car driven by a man in a suit passed by, so she stepped back. With the tree behind her, there was not much space, but there was enough for one step.

“Ah.”

Her back struck something other than the tree. It was more flexible and it shook.

It was a person.

She frantically turned around. This was the result of focusing too much on the booklet and thinking about letting Sayama comfort her. She needed to apologize.

She found a girl about her own age. The girl was tall and had her long hair tied behind her. She wore a black backpack with a cloth fishing rod holder attached.

…I hope she isn't mad.

Shinjou looked, but the girl's expression seemed strange.

When someone was hurt by a stranger, they would normally gather their eyebrows together in a frown, but this girl was staring at her with slightly raised eyebrows.

She almost looked surprised.

Was it really that surprising? worried Shinjou.

"I'm sorry. A-are you okay?"

The girl took a moment to react. The pause was long enough that Shinjou worried she had not heard her.

"…"

The girl's first reaction was to relax her expression and shoulders.

She then took a breath and brushed up her hair.

"There is nothing to worry about. Um… What is your name?"

The girl asked probingly, but Shinjou saw no reason to question her about it.

"Sadagiri. Shinjou Sadagiri."

As soon as she answered, Shinjou worried the girl was going to demand money from her. Rude terms such as extortionist, con artist, and ransom abduction filled her mind for a moment.

…But I have someone even more amazing by my side.

Thinking that put her at ease, so she relaxed and let out a breath so the girl would not notice.

"What about you?"

The girl answered as if she had been waiting to be asked.

"Toda. …Toda Mikoku."

●

Mikoku saw Shinjou right in front of her.

After hearing her name, Shinjou looked up a bit and moved her lips as she thought on the name.

“Toda-san? I’m very sorry.”

She bowed. The words accompanying that movement of long, black hair were those of one speaking to a stranger.

That fact caused Mikoku’s shoulders to droop a little.

“I knew it.”

“Eh?”

“Nothing. More importantly, you need to be careful. You might be fine on a major road like this, but the back roads of this city are narrow and the telephone poles stick out into the road in a lot of places. Not paying attention to your surroundings is dangerous.”

“Oh, I see.”

Shinjou looked around the major road and then down the narrow roads between buildings.

After confirming what she had been told, she nodded.

“Do you live here?” she asked.

“No, I am from Tokyo.”

The cautious strength in Shinjou’s expression left when she heard that.

“Oh, so am I. Where in Tokyo do you live? I’m from Akigawa.”

Mikoku just about answered but caught herself and gave a displeased frown.

“Nowhere important.”

“I see…”

When Shinjou lowered her head in disappointment, Mikoku frantically spoke up.

“Oh, but I hear Akigawa is nice. For example, the central park was opened up to the citizens after it wasn’t being used for many official events, they rely on other cities for garbage disposal so as not to pollute their own air, and they use a lot of tax money to build up the river banks and keep the river from flooding.”

“I-is it really that nice a place? And you sure do know a lot about it. Do you live in a nearby city?”

“You could say that.”

She had to keep Shinjou from asking further and there was a lot she had to ask as a member of the Army.

She needed to secretly ask about the important points.

"Um… What are your hobbies?"

"Eh?"

That was not what she was supposed to ask. She was focusing too much on the personal side, so she slapped herself on the cheek.

"I am here for work, but what about you?"

She was worried that question was being overly familiar, but Shinjou began to think with a finger in front of her mouth.

"Well… A training camp I suppose. Yes, a student council training camp. We're staying on a desert island in the Seto Inland Sea."

"Sounds like quite the adventure. I hear there are pirates known as Wokou in the Seto Insland Sea, so be careful."

"It's not the Sengoku period anymore, so I don't think they're still around."

"I see. I did not look into it that far. …Anyway, why are you in Kurashiki? Securing supplies?"

"Yeah, we're picking up something."

Shinjou turned toward the convenience store and Mikoku followed her gaze.

"…!"

She saw a boy through the window. He held a fax telephone receiver in one hand while looking through the documents being printed off.

"After we finish here, we were going to look around the Bikan district."

Her tone was cheerful, but it caused Mikoku to hold her breath. She had a sword inside a cloth fishing rod holder. She could enter the convenience store and swing the sword with all her might while he was trapped in the fax corner.

…He would not be able to avoid it.

Tension ran across her face and she grabbed the cloth holder.

However…

"Um, can I ask you something?"

Shinjou turned a smile toward her, so Mikoku's expression returned to normal.

She regained her slightly relaxed smiled.

…I'm being too soft.

She scolded herself, but then made an excuse.

…This is better than having her find me suspicious and putting up her guard.

She took two breaths before slowly responding.

“What do you want to ask me?”

“Eh? Oh, right.”

Shinjou held out a booklet with hand-drawn maps of Kurashiki that was turned to the map of the Bikan district.

“You seem to know a lot about Kurashiki, so do you know any interesting places in the Bikan district?”

Mikoku was unsure what to say.

During the overnight train ride, she had carefully read a sightseeing booklet of her own. She had put together a list of places to visit after she finished guarding Hajji, but it had been centered on places to buy souvenirs for Shino.

“Will you be going there with him?”

“Eh? Oh, yes.” Shinjou blushed. “With him.”

“I see.” Mikoku mentally sighed. “Then I have a suggestion for you. There is a photo studio around here in the Bikan district. Also, you can likely take a nice commemorative photo on this street here. I suggest you do so.” She nodded. “That way you will still have a record of it even if you lose your memories.”

“Eh?”

Mikoku belatedly realized what she had said.

…Ah.

She realized how careless she had been, but did not let it show.

After a moment of hesitation, she held out her hand to distract Shinjou from her question. She held the hand above Shinjou’s head and gently touched the top of her hat.

She could feel the fibrousness and softness of Shinjou’s hair through the white-dyed straw.

Shinjou tensed up a bit, but Mikoku did not pull back.

…She is so soft.

As she thought, a wind blew through.

Kurashiki was a flat city, so this summer wind was warm and gentle. A few beads of sweat appeared on her face and the surrounding noises sounded louder than before.

“I must hurry on, so this is as long as I can stay. We may meet again some time.”

“Yes. Until then, Toda.”

“Call me Mikoku. It means to carve into life. Much like your name, Shinjou Sadagiri.”

Shinjou’s eyes widened somewhat and Mikoku made sure she would remember that expression.

And then she turned her back.

“Ah.”

Shinjou spoke up, but Mikoku did not turn back around. She merely raised a hand.

“Give my regards to that boy. That fortunate boy.”

Chapter 22

“Pulse of Ascertainment”

Movements always have something extra
A sound of beginning
A sound of announcement

●

There was a place where the summer air felt cool.

Namely, a mountaintop.

In the heights, one could immerse themselves in the cool summer air without relying on the wind.

During the summer, the mountains to the west of Tokyo were a degree or two lower than the city on average. The trees of the forests and the dirt of the earth maintained the humidity, so the ground was cool as well.

In those mountains was a certain cemetery. The entrance was located at the base of the mountain and the sign there called it the Nishitama Cemetery.

The Bon Festival had yet to arrive, but two people stood on the long stairway leading up to the cemetery at the peak.

One was a young man wearing black and the other was a maid wearing black.

The maid held a bucket filled with flowers in her right hand. Despite carrying the bucket of water up the stairs, her gait was lighter than the man next to her. He had to use a metal cane to climb the stairs.

Her white hair shook as she waited for him to move ahead five steps and then she followed.

After she caught up, the man turned his sunglasses toward her.

“You can go on ahead, Sf. And that doesn’t end with these stairs. You can abandon me and go wherever you want. Yes, even to the next life.”

“Tes. If that is your wish, I will obey. But I did not think you believed in an afterlife.”

“I believe in it for you, so be thankful.”

“Tes. I am activating my gratitude circuits.”

Sf lowered the bucket, faced Itaru, and clapped her hands thrice.

“Namu.”

“Is that how you show gratitude, Sf?”

“Tes. German UCAT’s research on Japan is perfect. This expression of gratitude symbolizes the union of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, but it was also determined to be a suitable symbol for the union between East and West Germany.”

Sf looked back toward Itaru, but he was already silently continuing up the stairs.

She followed him only after completing her expression of gratitude by bringing her hands together and bowing.

“Itaru-sama, where are we going today?”

“I’m not telling.”

“Tes. Understood. So it is a secret. It has been a while since you wanted to share a secret with me. The last time was my third week after arriving in Japan.”

“We shared a secret?”

“Tes. While cleaning the room you provided for me, I detected a strange hollow area below the floor and peeled up the floorboard to reveal a large number of figurines. They were all modified into ‘sheeeh’, ‘komanechi’, ‘gachon’, and ‘just kidding’ poses. Three hours later, you interrogated Kazuo-sama and had him tell the truth, but you mentioned that I was to keep it a secret. I have determined that is a valuable memory.”

“Please forget it ever happened. It’s an embarrassment to the Ooshiro family.”

Itaru continued up the stairs, Sf followed, and he continued even further.

As that process repeated, they arrived at the peak. The graveyard entrance contained a slight wind and the bright sun.

Itaru walked east as if opposing the wind and Sf spoke to him while pointing forward.

“Itaru-sama, the Sayama family grave is that way.”

“We’re going this way today. I have an obligation at a different grave.”

“Tes. I have determined you have a great number of friends.”

“Do the dead count as friends? They don’t exist in reality anymore.”

“Tes. I have determined humans have great imagination. They never use it for anything worthwhile, though.”

“I see,” said Itaru. “Do you not imagine things?”

“Tes. I can make predictions, but the way you humans fabricate meaningless desires in your thoughts baffles me and I do not see why it is necessary. Why is reality not good enough for you?”

“Ask that to my old man. He’s nowhere near satisfied with it.”

“Tes. I once asked him directly, but he ran off in tears,” she said. “But why do you imagine?”

“Look around you.”

Sf did so while continuing to walk.

“Tes. I have determined it is a cemetery. What about it?”

“Why do you think there are gravestones here?”

“Tes. They are a sign that the land is owned as a grave and they prove which family it belongs to.”

That answer put a bitter smile on Itaru’s lips.

“That’s why you have no imagination. There’s a hole in your theory, so answer this: if these gravestones are not there for the reality of possession and family, what do you think humans imagine their purpose is?”

“As I am an automaton and not a human, I do not understand the premise of the question.”

“Then why are you asking about our imaginations?”

“Tes. Because it is something I cannot do.”

“What if we added in some new circuits? Then could you do it?”

“Tes,” replied Sf. “It would be impossible according to my definition of imagination.”

“And what is that definition?”

Sf nodded.

“Tes. It came with my foundational memories. In my deepest depths, there is a place even further down than language that forms the base of everything. Someone’s thoughts are located there. I believe people imagine things because they do not contain that important factor.”

Itaru looked up into the sky, frowned, and clenched his teeth.

“Is something the matter, Itaru-sama?”

He did not answer her question. He instead ground his teeth and muttered quietly.

“Diana…”

Sf tilted her head, but he asked a question while still looking into the sky.

“But if you know that, why not do the same for yourself? Lose that important factor and then imagine.”

“That is impossible. When I lose you, I will destroy myself. I will not have time for imagination.” She gave Itaru an expressionless

look. “Am I wrong, Itaru-sama?”

“Tes. I have determined you are correct.” Itaru clicked his tongue. “You really were formatted by German UCAT. Diana can’t just leave well enough alone, can she?”

“Tes. But I was made especially for you. If you are delighted, email your thoughts to German UCAT’s Sf support team. Do so now and you will be entered into a raffle with prizes for three winners.”

“What are the prizes? Gifts for the Bon Festival?”

“Tes. They are Sf holiday tickets. Collect five and I will take a day off.”

“Wow, this the first time I’ve actually been thankful for the information you give me. I’d better send that email right away. And please continue taking days off for the rest of your life.”

“Tes. I will now give you your participation prize: 10 Sf hard work tickets. For each one, I will assist you for 24 hours. I will manage their use, so-… What is that expression, Itaru-sama? I cannot seem to place it.”

“…”

“Itaru-sama, here is a saying to help you calm down: grow angry and you lose. How was that?”

“You really do know how to bring out my emotions.”

“Tes.” She bowed. “I am honored to receive your praise. As that phrase has proven to bring about an undiscovered secondary effect, I will likely continue speaking it forever. I must send a report to German UC- Why are you continuing on ahead?”

“You’re a pain to deal with.”

He walked forward and she followed to prevent him from moving too far away.

However, he soon came to a stop.

“?”

She looked toward him and his sunglasses. The black sunglasses were facing a gravestone below a tree.

“I can see the words ‘Hiba Family’,” she said. “I can also see a woman in Japanese clothing.”

The woman standing before the grave turned toward Sf’s voice. She was short, her hair was mixed with gray, her thin eyes were bent in a smile, and she bowed.

“It’s been a while, Ooshiro-kun.”

“Yes.” Itaru nodded. “It really has, Ms. Hiba. Ryuuichi’s funeral was the last time, wasn’t it?”

●

A building with tall white walls sat below the sun as noon approached.

This was 3rd-Gear’s base. The emergency exit on the side near the top opened and a young man stood on the elevator sticking out.

He was Apollo.

He rested his elbows on the railing and watched the cityscape beyond the mountain forest.

His narrowed eyes followed a train travelling west from the distant station. Once it moved out of view, he watched the countless cars and buses moving through the streets.

He listened to the faint sounds of the engines.

“…?”

But then he heard a song.

He cleared his ears to determine where it was coming from.

The song was formed from several female voices.

That harmony of voices was nearby. It came from the open hangar door directly below.

In that case, he knew who had to be singing.

“Those are the automatons, Lord Apollo.”

Hearing a voice behind him, he looked up but did not turn around.

“What is the meaning of this, Moira 1st?”

“Lady Miyako said she was going to the hangar after breakfast.”

“Why did you allow her to? None of the other guests were ever allowed to approach Typhon.”

“She is one of our masters,” answered Moira 1st. “Also, while eating breakfast, she asked if 3rd-Gear really does have ghosts. It seemed like idle curiosity, so I told her any ghosts would appear near Typhon because it contains half of the Concept Core that is the Tartaros.”

“Did Miyako see the supposedly impossible afterimage of an individual 3rd-Gear soul?”

“We have seen one plenty of times. Typhon is likely interested in Lady Miyako, but Typhon and its Tartaros have never shown an interest in the living before.”

Moira 1st smiled and Apollo smiled bitterly.

“You really are cruel,” he said. “Are you not going to tell her the full truth?”

“She will approach it on her own. We simply must reevaluate everything afterwards. I am sure she will show us something we have overlooked due to knowing too much.”

“Then will she remain here?”

“She does not remain here. She simply is here.”

His shoulders shook in laughter.

“Ha ha. You really have taken a liking to her. Typhon might eliminate her, you know?”

“Perhaps, but I hear our clash with Low-Gear is approaching and I think someone should see everything we bear.”

“Even if Low-Gear cannot defeat Typhon?”

“Even that is part of the current situation.”

The singing changed. Apollo could tell one automaton was singing the accompaniment while the others sang the lyrics.

He then heard Moira 1st speak with a smile in her voice.

“Lady Miyako taught us that song. When she saw the girls down below working in silence, she commented on the absence of a radio. When we asked what that was, she told us Low-Gear often plays music while working. Listening to it silently supposedly helps you focus and lifts your spirits.”

“And that led to this song?”

“The song she taught us was quiet, so we made some alterations.”

“I see.”

He nodded.

“I see,” he gently repeated. “I’ve heard 3rd-Gear did the same thing during my grandfather’s generation.”

“Yes, I recall Lord Cronus mentioning it.” She paused for a beat. “He also said the one who inherited the position of sun god would be in charge of music.”

“Music wasn’t a concept, so I didn’t inherit that.”

“Then how about you learn now?”

“You mean learn the music of Low-Gear who we are about to fight?”

“The air you are breathing now also belongs to Low-Gear.”

And…

“Isn’t Low-Gear music the same as 3rd-Gear’s? I am not a combat model, but I believe I can distinguish between what is an enemy and what is not. What about you, Lord Apollo?”

Apollo lowered his shoulders and sighed.

“I sure am being bullied a lot today. But…”

“But?”

“What do this song’s lyrics mean?”

“Well,” replied Moira 1st. “It is a song blessing the night on which a precious holy man of this world was born.”

●

Surrounded by song, Miyako watched the work progress.

The automatons maintained the gods of war with a combination of pure strength and skilled technique. They could control gravity, so they could lift parts larger than themselves with a single hand and fix them in midair.

While watching, Miyako realized there was no crane.

There were only the hangers supporting the gods of war and the scaffolding the automatons used to move about. They moved from scaffold to scaffold with quick hops, but those hops spanned several meters.

A nearby automaton explained the system that allowed that kind of movement.

“We are puled across by directional gravity which is created until just before the target distance.”

By repeating the action in midair, they could apparently move back and forth like a pendulum.

When in a hurry, the ones up top would lift up those down below and the two of them would combine their acceleration.

A green god of war arm passed by Miyako’s head and one of the automatons stopped singing. It was the one named Violet and she spoke to the automaton transporting the arm.

“C-come on! Lady Miyako has no gravitational control, so think about what would happen if it fell!”

“Oh, my apologies! But she can catch something like this, can’t she?”

“I thought automatons couldn’t make jokes,” complained Miyako with her hands on her hips.

The automatons all laughed and began singing once more. They were singing a modified version of Silent Night. They had not known what a song was and had wanted her to sing for them, so she had done so while sweating nervously.

The song had a poor tempo for work, so the automatons had taken it upon themselves to alter the tempo to match the wavelength of their actions. At first, their voices copied Miyako's own, but they had returned to their normal voices after adjusting the tempo.

Miyako had decided only two things for them.

"One of you sing the accompaniment with whatever noise you like. After a verse, the next one takes over the accompaniment. You can set up a rotation like that."

The accompaniment changed again. The previous automaton had used "lu" sounds, but this one used "ah" sounds.

She detected great skill in the voices and she surmised they had been built to sing.

During their morning break, she had asked about the effect singing had on their work and they had replied as follows:

"Based on our statistics, the frequency of records made and number of test thoughts performed have increased. Even if our efficiency remains the same, the records and test thoughts should increase our precision."

When she had asked what that meant, they had exchanged a glance and reached a unanimous answer.

"By entering a set flow such as music while working, the conditions for creating records become clearer. Also, the miscellaneous thoughts concerning the work are eliminated by the song, so we can completely focus on the work."

"So to put it more simply, you can remember things and concentrate more easily?"

"Not just that. We vow to do all things perfectly, so singing well while working is a sort of test for us. Especially while singing the accompaniment. With this many people, your turn does not come often, so you think about how to sing better, introduce less noise, and use the motions of the work to eliminate any shaking in your voice the next time your turn comes around. You want your turn to come more quickly and you want to more quickly and precisely

perform the work."

"Don't get so lost in thought you stop paying attention to the work."

That comment had produced smiles from them.

It was now the second morning work period and lunch would come once it was complete.

While Miyako ate, she planned to have the automatons look after the seeds they had planted the day before and make observation records. She considered having them make the records with pencil and paper in addition to the records in their brains.

...Would that make a better living record?

Meanwhile, Moira 3rd passed by with an armful of large screws.

Miyako watched her finish carrying the screws and then called out to her.

"Do you always overhaul all eight gods of war like this?"

"There used to be more and some were in the underground hall. However, it has been a while since we performed a full overhaul on all of them. We are doing this because Low-Gear's UCAT has come to a place called the Seto Inland Sea."

"Are you going to fight?"

"Hm? We're not combat models, so I doubt it."

"I see."

Miyako breathed a sigh of relief and looked toward the gods of war.

"So who pilots these things? It isn't the rich boy, right?"

"My middle sister. She uses the general remote piloting device down below. It was originally meant to unite someone, but they're gone now. The cockpit remains unchanged and a remote control system was inserted into the nervous system. It can cross the barriers between concept spaces, so not much information can be sent back and forth and the gods of war don't always move quite right. The damage to the god of war doesn't feed back to the pilot, though."

"I see. So the pilot will be fine and even an automaton can do it."

But if Moira 3rd's explanation was accurate, it meant the Hecatoncheires named Gyes, Cottus, and Aigaion were possibly going to fight Low-Gear soon.

"And so will Typhon."

Miyako looked further back in the hangar.

She had yet to focus on and look at that white god of war.

The giant six-winged machine was being repaired by a few automatons.

Assuming it had been called out to some fight during the night again, she looked at its damaged form.

"…"

She nodded and started walking.

She made her way to it, knowing Moira 3rd would follow a step behind.

She walked toward Typhon which had slight damage to the right arm and head.

●

A song filled the darkness.

A hall existed underneath the hangar.

Spare god of war parts were stored there and it was divided by several thick pillars, but a certain device was located in one corner.

The machine looked like a vehicle's cockpit had been cut out, including the roof and floor.

Inside it was a monitor and a seat with keyboards shaped for five fingers on either side.

Near the chair were a foot point for each foot and an arm point for each arm. Those four points were connected to the chair with wires so the person sitting inside would have all their movements recorded.

Currently, an automaton sat in that seat.

The slender automaton with blonde hair noticeable even in the darkness was Moira 2nd.

"…"

She opened her eyes in the darkness and the front console lit up and displayed text.

"God of war remote control – Preparing to rearrange all armor for combat – Switching to sleep mode."

She nodded and stepped out of the seat.

That completed her work for the morning. Once the others altered the detailed locations of the extremity drivers, she would perform her next check, but she predicted that would be late in the

afternoon at around five.

She began to walk.

It was too dark to see the floor, but the console behind her provided some residual light and she was used to walking through here.

Her footsteps suggested she was walking on stone and she travelled to the west end. After passing by a large pillar, she looked to her right.

A large shadow lay there.

The collapsed giant was a god of war. The torso had been sliced in two. It was a pale color and something had been gouged out of the back where the cockpit would be.

"…"

She looked away from the god of war, closed her eyes, and continued walking.

The sound of her footsteps changed as the unseen floor gained a slope.

After walking a certain distance, she reached out in front of her.

Suddenly, white daylight surrounded her.

"…!"

She closed her eyes but still exited.

A moment later, wind blew as something closed behind her.

As her vision grew accustomed to the light, she looked around.

"…"

She stood to the west of 3rd-Gear's building. The hangar entrance was on the east, so this was the back entrance.

After circling around to the south, the wall reflected the sunlight and she saw eaves formed from a metal frame and metal panels.

Below the low eaves were rows of flower pots.

The flower pots contained soil and she tilted her head as she observed that slightly dry soil.

She had not received any seeds from Miyako the day before.

From her shared memories as an automaton, she understood that they had planted the seeds and planned to make them bloom.

But as she had not been there, she did not understand the reason why. Something that could only be felt while present could not be grasped from a memory.

"…"

She wordlessly observed the pots and silently asked a question once more.

…What is the point of this?

They would eventually wither up and disappear.

…Aren't they nothing more than that?

As she hung her head, she recalled the different guests who had wandered in here over the past sixty years. At first, she had interacted with all of them, but they were always so wary and would plead to be immediately sent back once they knew what she was.

Her elder and younger sister would always rewrite their memories and Gyes or Aigaion would take them outside.

That had repeated again and again and remnants of 1st-Gear had once visited to negotiate.

Everything had gone well the first time. 1st-Gear had been wary due to 3rd-Gear's past, but they had been relieved to find only the automatons were meeting with them. That was why the automatons had dealt with them as guests.

But the second visit had been an attack and the situation had only grown worse.

The reason for that was Typhon. At first, the Hecatoncheires and a god of war remotely controlled by Moira 2nd had been sent out as a threat, but Typhon had intruded afterwards.

The battle had been over in an instant and the possibility of 1st-Gear ever arriving as guests again had been eliminated.

…I have had enough.

There was no reason to smile, no reason to speak, and no reason to use her ability to detect someone's health.

She had never once had the satisfaction of receiving a guest and obtaining joy in response.

All she needed to do was optimize her skills at remotely battling the enemy.

That was all.

"…"

However, she looked toward the wall. The sunlight reflecting off the white wall prevented her from looking directly at it without reducing the brightness of her sight devices.

She had seen that wall for sixty years now, but she now heard a certain noise coming from the hangar on the other side.

She heard singing voices.

She had once heard from Cronus that humans would produce primitive music using their physical voices.

…Even that song is meaningless in the end.

Everything would eventually be lost and become meaningless.

However…

"…"

…Does this guest know that as she gives these things to them?

Did she?

…What if there really is a meaning?

In the instant that thought entered her brain, Moira 2nd felt an impossible sensation: a pulse.

Her mechanical body did not have one of those. She had once heard the sound again and again while checking whether or not certain humans could bear children.

"…?"

She could not have heard Miyako's pulse because her ability only worked at close range.

…Then…

She soon found the answer.

At her feet was a line of flower pots filled with soil.

"…"

She used her ability to listen. The flower seeds in the soil had yet to even bud, but she could hear the beginnings of a movement that could be called a pulse.

The seeds slowly absorbed water and the water gently circulated within them.

As the line of several dozen seeds all breathed together, it produced a loud noise.

She heard it.

As if they wanted her to listen, these few dozen new movements were tickling at an ability she had not used in so long.

Their movements resounded.

"…"

She closed her eyes as if to withstand the noise of the flowers.

But she could not oppose what her ability sought. The pulse reverberated in her body and the song reached her ears.

She heard the vocal accompaniment and the singing voices.

“…”

What was she to make of this thing that she knew nothing of yet had once existed in 3rd-Gear?

She faced forward to the east.

If she circled around to that side, she would reach the hangar entrance.

Chapter 23

“Accusing Attacker”

What is faster than words?
That would be something that exceeds sound
It would be words and communication that exceeds sound

●

Miyako stopped next to Typhon.

At five meters, she was just within reach of its arms.

However, there was no light in its eyes.

It isn't running, she thought.

Five maids were moving about on Typhon and the hanger surrounding it. Their primary jobs were replacing the armor plates, repairing the head and right arm, and readjusting moving parts below the armor.

They sang as they worked.

Looking at it like this, Typhon was nothing but a weapon. It could only stand there as a hunk of metal.

It did not scream or do anything else.

…How strange.

The light in its eyes the other night had made it seem alive, but that may have only been the case when the pilot was inside.

She looked to the side and saw Cottus's giant blue form.

"Are you always here?"

"Affirmative."

"Do Gyes and Aigaion not help with maintenance?"

"Different job. Busy."

"I know Aigaion earns money at a greengrocer, but what does Gyes do?"

Rather than Cottus, Moira 3rd answered as she caught up to Miyako's right.

"She's patrolling and examining the area around here. She leaves the concept space to guard it and lately she's been going to places that have something called the internet to check on some information."

"I see."

Moira 3rd continued speaking while stretching.

"Those two have philosopher's stones for outside work. The gods of war and Cottus do too, but they can't show up in public looking like that, y'know? I wish I had a philosopher's stone so I could go outside."

Her voice was bright, but Miyako guessed that last comment was what she truly thought.

Miyako had heard they were able to move their base. A few times in the past, they had moved the entire space so the base would not be found, but they could not leave the space surrounding the base.

…Is it like being in a cage?

Their desire for guests and a master may have been to make up for their inability to leave.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey. Miyako. Next time you go outside, can you bring something back for me?”

“What do you want? Just tell me.”

“Hmm. Then get me the Sudden Death Man chocolates that Aigaion brought back before.”

“Oh, the ones with the Lifestyle Disease Angel and the Overwork Demon? Can you even eat candy?”

“No. I’ll take the sticker and you can have the chocolate. The others would probably be fine with that too.”

“Wait. I’ll have to buy an entire case to have enough for everyone.”

There were approximately 60 maids in all. If each one was 30 yen, that was 1800 yen. If she went to a supermarket where she could get 10% off…

…Um…

She was bad at mental calculations. She converted it to about 1600 yen and upped it to 1700 yen to include tax. That was cheaper than a CD.

“Okay, I can handle that. It’s perfectly okay!”

“Um, Miyako? What’s okay?”

She decided not to answer Moira 3rd.

Suddenly, the automaton began to float. Miyako looked over and saw Moira 1st had approached at some point and was dragging Moira 3rd behind something by the collar.

“Oh, big sister. What is it? Where are you taking me!?”

The larger automaton ignored her and moved out of Miyako’s view.

“Stop making unreasonable requests! Lady Miyako has her financial situation to worry about.”

“B-but she said it was okay.”

“It obviously is not okay if she has to think about it so much first. Not to mention that she is busy.”

“Ehhh? She clearly isn’t busy.”

You’re both right and I can hear you both, thought Miyako as something new began out of her view.

“If you say that, I have no choice but to punish you. Now, it’s time to crack that butt!!”

“Waaaah! Big sister! You knocked my hip joints out of place.”

“You can’t fool me with those fake tears. I can see it with my thermal vision. And to make sure you see your mistake, I will be taking your hip joint bolts.”

“Hmph. Fine. I can hold it all in place with my gravitational control. I don’t need legs.”

A dull metallic noise filled the air.

“Wah! You dented it!”

Dented what? thought Miyako, but she turned her back because she felt wrong listening in on a fight between sisters.

She took a breath and looked up at Cottus.

“Do you ever want to go outside?”

“Battle request?”

“No, uh, that wasn’t what I meant.”

Cottus tilted his head and that action told Miyako something.

…To him, leaving here means battle.

“Maybe I’m just being sentimental. Well, if you ever want to leave, just tell me.”

“Understood.”

He nodded and Miyako recalled the previous day. Apollo had lent her his cane and she would have been able to leave using it, but here she was.

…Only the other two Hecatoncheires can leave.

As she muttered in her heart, she realized something was missing.

When thinking about who could leave, she was omitting a member of the 3rd-Gear group. She had failed to think about the person who would most naturally be able to leave.

“That would be…”

She remembered.

“That idiot.”

When she recalled the name “Apollo”, she let out a voice of realization.

She had completely forgotten despite exchanging headbutts with him the evening before. He had provoked her and had her say what she truly thought.

…And he protected me when the cliff collapsed.

Dammit, she thought *He showed off and then had me blurt out my true thoughts.*

"It all started with that idiot suddenly sitting down."

She rubbed her shoe's heel against the floor in frustration, but then she recalled something strange.

The concept that allowed machines to live had been weak there, so the automatons could only function there for a short period of time.

So why had a human like Apollo collapsed?

"…?"

She folded her arms. She knew she was not very smart, so she thought carefully.

…Does he have some kind of disease? Did he have some kind of fit?

But if that was the case, why had he been able to go through with that argument shortly thereafter? Someone who collapsed just from walking a bit would have to be insane to raise his blood pressure by grabbing someone else's collar, shouting, and headbutting.

…He did bleed from that, so he must not be an automaton.

However, the automatons had been watching on from overhead during that argument. That meant it had been just barely removed from the outer boundary.

She had no proof, but an idea occurred to her.

…Is he a human who can only live in places an automaton can function?

What did that mean?

She searched for Moira 1st to ask her, but she did not hear anything from the area Moira 1st and 3rd had gone. Something new may have been happening outside.

"That's no good, then."

She instead turned toward the automatons maintaining Typhon. One with black hair had finished removing an armor panel from the leg and was taking a break.

"Hey," called Miyako.

She chose her words carefully as the maid turned a smile in her direction.

“Does Apollo come here often?”

“He stops by at a frequency I would call ‘occasionally’.”

“Is that so?” She made her way toward her real question. “Does that idiot ever go outside?”

The ends of the maid’s eyebrows lowered slightly at that question.

She did not know what to do.

Seeing that, Miyako asked further about the answer to the question before the maid could fall into mechanical confusion.

“He can’t leave, can he? Why?”

“Well…”

“Is he sick?”

“No.”

“Has he made some kind of promise?”

“No.”

“Does he simply prefer to stay here?”

“No.”

Then what is it? she thought.

A word then occurred to her.

…But that’s only worth making a joke.

She shrugged her shoulders and asked while assuming the maid would not understand what she meant.

“Is it a curse?”

“Yes.”

That answer caused her to freeze in place while still shrugging.

She remained speechless for a short time as she tried to grasp what the maid’s confirmation meant.

“Does 3rd-Gear have curses?”

“The translation concept is likely conveying our word ‘curse’ as the word you are hearing. Our word is defined as a defect that is remotely forced upon one by someone else and that can be removed under certain conditions.”

Miyako repeated that definition in her head.

…In other words…

“Someone is forcing that rich boy to bear some kind of restriction or handicap?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a way to remove it?”

The maid reacted to that slowly-asked question with hesitation. She was trying to decide whether she should answer or not.

But after the span of a few breaths, she took a step forward and lowered her head.

“There is a single method.”

She hesitated to continue and fell silent, so Miyako scratched at her own head.

A curse.

That term did not seem to fit the mechanical Gear that was 3rd-Gear, but she had seen something similar the previous night.

“This is a strange place. You have curses and a strange ghost-like woman shows up.”

“Eh? A ghost-like woman…?”

“Oh, from your tone, I take it you know what I’m talking about. A pale glowing woman with long hair. She looked like she was about to cry.”

And…

“!”

Suddenly, Miyako was shoved to the right.

…What!?

As her vision tumbled, she saw that a new maid had charged into the spot she had been standing in.

…Moira 2nd!?

That automaton had shoved both Miyako and the maid she had speaking with.

Miyako looked up while wondering why.

A giant shadow that almost looked like a large tree was falling from overhead.

It was an arm. A metal arm covered in white armor.

Typhon’s arm had fallen from the shoulder block.

An instant later, Moira 2nd turned toward Miyako and their gazes met.

“…”

The automaton smiled just as the steel arm fell on top of her.

●

Miyako heard the singing stop.

The great noise had already ended and she only heard the sounds of scattering components.

The low, rhythmic sound in her ears was her own pulse which was raised in panic and surprise.

…*What just happened!?*

The emotion of that mental shout raised her pulse even further.

She realized she could move her legs and she was not trembling, so she began to stand up.

"Ah."

But she staggered. It was less that her footing was unsteady and more that she was too tense.

She placed a hand on the floor in front of her and managed to stand.

She then saw the giant arm only three steps away.

It was Typhon's left arm which was covered in armor panels and surface buffering armor. The upper arm was as thick as Miyako's torso. The shoulder connector was open, so a steel plug thirty centimeters thick was exposed and pointed upwards.

There was almost no gap between the arm and the floor and something was crushed beneath it: components made of delicate metal and ceramic as well as fragments of those components.

The parts that had not been smashed to pieces lay between the arm and Miyako.

The remaining parts were nothing but a portion of a female upper body.

The head, the right side of the back, and the right arm lay face down. The black maid uniform had been caught at and pulled by the arm and floor and it looked as if the maid had been squeezed out from between the two of them.

Her short blonde hair shook, her eyes were closing, and she was not moving.

Except that is, for her lips.

Miyako heard her voice.

"Please help…"

"Eh?"

Miyako frantically crouched down and listened closely as Moira 2nd spoke so very quietly while moving only her lips.

“Please help Lord Apollo. He is a victim of the Concept War. He is unstable as a human…and thus must receive the restrictions of a machine.”

“How do you remove those restrictions? Surely you have a way using your technology.”

Her frantic question received no reply and Moira 2nd stopped moving altogether.

But Miyako continued to shout.

“Don’t go to sleep!!”

That produced a small smile from the automaton.

“Understood…”

She opened her mouth and spoke the rest with difficulty.

“Th-the method is…”

“Is?”

“Something that…Lord Apollo c-cannot d-do…b-by him…himsel-sel-self.”

“I see.”

Miyako nodded and touched Moira 2nd’s cheek to tell her she had understood.

All strength left the automaton’s body and she did not speak any further.

No one moved, so Miyako stood up, turned in every direction, and shouted out.

“Someone take Moira 2nd to get help!”

With shudders of realization, some nearby maids, including the one who had escaped damage thanks to Moira 2nd, quickly ran over. Seeing that, Miyako breathed a sigh of relief.

“She isn’t going to die from this, right? Right?”

“There is nothing to worry about. As long as her head remains, her memories can be returned.”

“I see.”

Miyako looked toward Moira 2nd with a quiet expression.

“Thank you.”

After thanking the automaton for saving her, strength entered her eyebrows.

…I could let it end like this, but…

She looked up toward Typhon’s shoulder, but not a single maid was there.

The maids working on it had been in the process of replacing the armor around the waist. Five of them were paused where they had been lifting the giant metal panel together.

…In that case…

Typhon's arm had fallen from the shoulder on its own.

"That wasn't an accident due to poor maintenance, was it?"

She looked over.

…Typhon's eyes.

She saw a faint light there.

"…!?"

And it was a pale bluish-white. It was the same cold light as when she had been abducted.

"Is someone in there!?"

…Who is it? No, it doesn't matter who it is.

Typhon had definitely attempted to prevent her from speaking any further with that maid. And it had attempted to do so with her death.

She had not heard any footsteps on the overhead catwalk, so Typhon's pilot would have been in the cockpit the entire time.

She wondered who it was. Was it the glowing woman from the previous night? Was it Apollo? At the moment, it did not matter which it was.

"Wait there!"

She lifted her heel, turned around, and began running.

●

Miyako ran.

There was a staircase up to the catwalk on the hangar wall, so she ran there while keeping her eye on Typhon to ensure no one fled from the cockpit on its back.

…From now on, those maids aren't going to tell me anything about Apollo or Typhon.

That falling arm had been a warning from the one controlling Typhon.

Who is it? she wondered.

This was the final 3rd-Gear member who was refusing to show themselves. It was the person controlling Typhon, the person who had not let Moira 1st and the others show her the hangar until now,

the person keeping Apollo inside the concept space, and the person who would crush their own automaton as a warning.

Miyako recalled what 3rd-Gear had done during the Concept War.

…This sounds like someone who would do those things.

She ran up the stairs.

The catwalk was about three stories up, which put it at the height of a god of war's back.

The empty passageway continued in a straight line and reached the left side of a back with six wings.

She had not seen anyone leave from the back, so she ran loudly and while swinging her arms.

She travelled the distance in an instant and arrived.

"I've got you now!!"

She stopped and stood on Typhon's back. The cockpit located between the six wings stuck out quite a bit further than the other gods of war and the inside of the block formed the basin that decomposed the pilot.

"…!"

But it was empty.

"Ah?"

She caught her breath and peered inside with a hand on one wing.

"Wait a second. Why?"

Why was no one inside?

That's cheating, she mouthed while leaning further forward to peer inside the cockpit.

But all she saw was a dimly-lit empty space and a metal floor.

"Wait…"

She took a breath, frowned, and felt a sinking feeling deep in her chest. It was a dark feeling. It was a mixture of impatience and fear because she knew something was going on but did not know what.

And as the feeling filled her, she saw a light. The light formed writing. A panel inside the cockpit contained a word in a pale light. She could not read it, but she could tell what it meant.

She knew the word.

"What is this?"

Before she could picture the characters in her mind, they

vanished. The cockpit fell into complete darkness and she realized Typhon was not going to move now.

Instead, she saw a strand of color.

“Hair?”

A single hair was caught in the cockpit’s door. She wrapped it around her finger to pull it out and the slender and soft blonde strand fluttered in the air.

She recognized the length and the color.

…This is Apollo’s.

But he was not inside, so it may have simply blown there in the wind.

In that case, who had piloted Typhon?

As soon as she asked herself that, she saw a light. The light took the form of slender fingers and approached the nape of her neck from behind.

“…!?”

She frantically turned around but found only empty space.

“What?”

No one was here, but she was certain someone had been.

While eating breakfast, Moira 1st had told her that a ghost or something similar might appear next to Typhon as it contained the Concept Core which functioned as the Tartaros. That something would be unable to touch anyone, but it would exist.

The fact that something like that existed brought a chill to her spine. Once she caught her breath, she tensed her back.

“…”

And she silently walked back along the catwalk.

She remained focused and noticed that Typhon’s eyes no longer contained any light. The fallen left arm and the connector on the shoulder showed no sign of being pried open or of bolts being loosened from the outside. The attachment base that could not be accessed from outside had opened naturally. The opening to that attachment base contained no damage like the right arm did, no cracks in the armor, and no scratches on the frame.

Typhon’s left arm had definitely been removed by the pilot, but Miyako started to focus on the right arm that was being repaired.

She focused on that broken right arm and…

“The slightly damaged head.”

Also…

"That writing and the presence behind me."

At that point, she sensed something about the damage to Typhon.

Something seemed off and she felt an odd sense of déjà vu.

…What is this? I feel like there's some important connection here.

Her vision then caught a hint.

Down below, the arm that had crushed Moira 2nd was being removed. Six automatons were lifting it on Moira 1st's instructions.

However, Miyako was looking at the automaton who had saved her rather than at Typhon's arm. The automaton's head was lowered and she was collapsed, but Miyako was looking at her unharmed right arm.

Moira 2nd's right index finger was pointing in a certain direction.

It was pointed straight down as if to some place below the floor.

●

An expanse of white sand lay below the blue sky.

Immediately behind the sand was a thin rocky area followed by a forest. The rocky area's height change separated the forest and the beach and the sea breeze reached the sparse branches of the pine forest.

Several green tents were set up at the entrance to the forest and all of them had thick waterproof sheets as roofs.

The shallow and rocky land meant the tents could not use stakes driven into the dirt.

"Use the rocks and have the trees act as pillars. But don't break the trees. Do that and you'll lose points and be in charge of dinner. I'm in the mood for curry. What about you? It's delicious."

Ooki was giving instructions while walking unsteadily across the rocky area.

Her instructions were not very useful, but the tents were somehow getting set up one after another.

Those who had finished would construct their stove, bathroom, and other facilities and then split into two groups. One group would go train while the other…

"Break time! I'm first!!"

With that shout, Kazami ran toward the ocean. She dashed across

the artificial beach while holding G-Sp2 and wearing an orange and black bikini. Water splashed into the air and she sank down into it.

“I’ve got our dinner!!”

Eventually, an explosive spray of water burst up from the ocean. The pillar of water reached around a dozen meters up and the rain of saltwater made it as far as the beach. Those on the beach cried out and avoided the rain which had several fish mixed in.

The fish flopped around as if in surprise after falling on the beach and Sibyl gathered them while wearing a light jacket.

Once a large basket was full, Kazami left the ocean.

She held up G-Sp2 in her right hand and did not bother wiping away the seawater running down her body.

終わりのクロニクル

“Ah, that felt great. But you really can’t underestimate a desert island out at sea. The current is fast and deep. We should probably run a rope from the rocky outcroppings on either side to show where your feet can reach the bottom.”

“Good idea, but what about Izumo-sama? He will almost certainly laugh as he crosses the rope and end up swept out to sea.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t die just because he stops breathing. More importantly, where’s Mikage?”

“Over there.”

Kazami looked where Sibyl pointed and saw someone in a dress sitting in the rocky area. The girl held a cane and simply stared up into the sky.

“She does not seem to have brought a swimsuit.”

“Yeah, I think she’s still reluctant to show off her body. Well, there’s more to see on this island than the ocean, so I hope something here can help her evolve.”

Two boys carrying baskets approached from beyond the rocky area.

Izumo and Hiba both wore T-shirts and shorts.

Kazami saw Mikage try to stand up as soon as she spotted Hiba. Her actions had a brightness absent from her usual expressionless face.

…She really cares about Hiba.

Kazami smiled and Sibyl whispered next to her.

“You looked just as happy when Izumo-sama appeared.”

“I’m not that straightforward.”

She shrugged and smiled as Izumo approached. He lowered the basket on his back a few steps away.

“Chisato.”

He turned toward her, looked at her face, her chest, her hips, and her legs.

“Chisato, listen closely.”

“What is it?”

“To be honest…” He placed a hand on her shoulder, looked up into the sky, and chose his words carefully. “I’ve always been a coward when it came to swimsuits, so I think I’m going to show more courage and- Don’t throw me that quickly!”

She immobilized the wrist on her shoulder just as she swept his

legs out from under him and rotated him around.

He flipped completely over in midair.

She had only recently learned this technique. Punches and kicks could harm the opponent too easily, but locking techniques could only defeat a single opponent. However, there was a different sort of technique that could defeat a single opponent and disturb or damage any others around.

…A throw!

The main trick was to continually pull her opponent's hand forward and down to create circular motion.

As a result, Izumo quickly rotated in midair.

His back would soon be slammed against the ground, but she trusted him to prepare for the landing. That trust came from the years she had spent with him and it allowed her to use her full training without worrying about him.

Good, good, she thought of her own movements when Sibyl suddenly spoke.

"Ch-Chisato-sama! Izumo-sama is going to fall into the ocean and get soaking wet!"

"Oh, no."

She quickly corrected his trajectory and the top of his head slammed into the relatively hard beach.

The sound of the impact filled the air and the sounds of tent preparations came to a halt.

As sand blew up into the air and fell back down, Kazami was left letting out a breath and wiping sweat from her brow.

"Thanks, Sibyl. Knowing Kaku, I doubt he packed any extra changes of clothing."

"Yes. Having him crawl around in wet clothing would affect both his health and our public morals."

Kazami looked to the rocky area and found Hiba glaring at her for some reason.

She tilted her head and he frantically held Mikage's shoulders and took a step back.

"U-um, I feel like I have to ask: is he okay?"

"Hm? Oh, he's fine. C'mon, get up, Kaku."

Kazami lifted Izumo up and struck his head with the tip of G-Sp2.

She would hit him with a vase to wake him in the mornings, but

even that was taking a while recently.

She occasionally wondered if he still had some reason to hesitate.

He now slowly opened his eyes.

“Yawn. Is it morning already?”

“Wake up already. We’re at the training camp.”

“Oh, that’s right. So what was I doing? Last thing I remember, I was gathering fruit in the forest with Hiba.”

“You probably fell out of a tree. Heh heh. Yes, let’s say that’s what happened.”

For some reason, Hiba held Mikage’s shoulders, turned around, and tried to sneak away.

“Hey, don’t run, Hiba.”

“I-I think Mikage-san wants to go in the shade.”

“Is that true, Mikage?”

Mikage turned toward Kazami and shook her head.

“Ahh, Mikage-san, you don’t understand,” said Hiba frantically. “The world is headed in an odd direction right now!”

“Your world is headed straight for hell,” warned Kazami.

Hearing that, Sibyl frowned.

“Chisato-sama, I do not think you should make implicit threats of murder to someone you do not know very well.”

“Y-yeah, you’re probably right. But…”

“Yes. He does not know you very well, so he will not understand unless make the threat explicit.”

“Sibyl? That was a very good point, but how about you keep points that good just between the two of us? …I said don’t run, Hiba!”

“But I don’t see why I should stay here.”

Hiba looked toward Mikage. She had her usual expressionless face, but she did not seem to have made her own decision. She looked at him expectantly to tell her what to do.

He sighed and faced Kazami with lowered eyebrows.

“Is there anything for me to do here?”

“They’re training over there. Would you rather join them?”

Kazami looked to the eastern side of the beach. She and the others were on the western side while the eastern side was used for training. An empty car and dummy building for infiltration training were prepared and Boldman stood before those needing training.

Despite the sun beating down on them, they all wore three-piece suits, neckties, and leather shoes.

Kazami watched as Boldman pushed round glasses (minus the lenses) up his nose and tightened his tie.

“Now then,” he said with a training manual under his arm. “Students, the summer training camp for Japanese UCAT Tokyo Branch Special and Standard Divisions begins now. I am Robert Boldman and I have been the training instructor since last year. I will not ask anything difficult. Simply answer ‘yes, teacher’ to whatever I say.”

“Yes, teacher!”

“Very good.”

A young Japanese man on one side whose gray suit was already darkened with sweat raised his hand.

“Yes, teacher! May I ask a question!?”

“Questions are generally not permitted, but as we have only just begun, I will allow it this once.”

“Yes, teacher! Why must wear suits as we train and speak overly politely like a bunch of homos? May I call you an idiot!?”

Around twenty of the others lined up gave looks of agreement.

“I see.” Boldman brought a hand to his forehead which was completely devoid of sweat. “During last year’s training camp on Mt. Osore, I gave the same training given to the American marine unit I belonged to. It started with shouting insults along the shore of the Sanzu River and running a marathon across Mt. Osore while singing an enjoyable round of an erotic song. Anyway, one of the trainees was filled with a rebellious spirit.”

He sighed.

“I tried to quell that rebelliousness, but the rebel…for the purposes of the story let’s say it was a she. Anyway, she said the lyrics of the song were horrible and I sent my aide after her, but she punched him and kicked him in the crotch. Her partner was a man who would not go down no matter how much you punched him, so I ended up receiving some injuries from the two of them.”

He indicated the area around the back of his neck.

“I was fine at the time, but aftereffects of the whiplash have been showing up lately and my wife is worried. At any rate, I spoke with the higher ups afterwards and realized my training method was

simply too outdated, so some of the fault lay with me."

He clenched his fist and looked up into the sky.

"And so I have given the concept of training new life. It has gone from being a wild and delinquent to stylish and politely intelligent! Training forever!!"

"…"

"Where's your answer?"

"Yes, teacher."

"I can't hear you."

"Yes, teacher!"

"Once more."

"Yes, teacher!!"

"Okay, try to make it *loud* for once! Ready, go!!"

"Yessss, teacherrrrr!!"

"Well done! Now, everyone, run three laps around the island. If it's getting tough, just tell me. We'll be running in a line and the slowest person takes the lead. Do you know the trick to running?"

"Yes, teacher!"

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"Yes, teacher!"

"You don't actually know, do you?"

"Yes, teacher!"

"Very good." Boldman pushed the round glasses up his nose again. "The tricking to running is to stay M-A-D. M for 'move ever forward', A for 'always accelerate', and D for 'dash and don't stop'. If you don't follow those rules, you'll be doing the same thing tomorrow."

"Yes, teacher! We'll make sure to stay MAD!"

"Okay, you there can take the lead first. Everyone else line up behind him."

"Y-yes, teacher!"

The man in a gray suit who responded ran across the beach as quickly as he could as if fleeing something. The next person gasped and frantically followed. More and more followed with no discrimination between the sexes or anything else. Lastly, Boldman ran after them.

"Okay, everyone, let's sing a song to increase our sense of unity. Just repeat after me."

“Yes, teacher!”

“Blooooming, blooooming, the target flower is blooooooming.”

“Blooooming, blooooming, the target flower is blooooooming.”

“They’re all in a rowwww, a nice straight rowwwww. Red clothes, black clothes, white clothes. Whatever flower you see, just cry yeehoo!”

“They’re all in a rowwww, a nice straight rowwwww. Red clothes, black clothes, white clothes. Whatever flower you see, just cry yeehoo!”

The alternating song disappeared into the distance.

After watching them leave, Kazami turned to Hiba.

He pointed toward the already vanished song and turned his head toward her.

“Is that really okay? The colors seemed pretty biased to me.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll get enough complaints for it to be changed next year.”

“I see. But I guess I can’t complain now.”

“Because you’re so happy to get to join them?”

“That is not what I meant!”

He let out a long, exhausted sigh and spread his mouth horizontally.

“That training is too much.”

“Then you’ll be training with me.”

He looked down toward the sudden voice from the ground and saw Izumo. Izumo sat up on the sand and faced Hiba on the rocky area.

“I asked you about joining us last night, but you didn’t give an answer even though we’ve showed you how well we can fight. …Of course, I’m sure you have your reasons.”

He stood up by leaping up from a sitting position.

“…”

With that single leap, he reached eye level.

“Hiba, you think you’re stronger than us, don’t you? How about we put that to the test?”

He landed as if stabbing his feet into the sand.

“C’mere. Let’s fight.”

“Fight? Are we going to spar? But do you have any martial arts experience?”

“Of course not. Only what they teach in the special division training.”

Hiba looked shocked.

“UCAT’s training is generally modeled after the militaries of different countries, isn’t it? Some of it may be filled with originality like what we just saw, but my grandfather gave me military style training until I was in tears and he trained me in the Hiba style of martial arts on top of that.”

“That’s fine by me. I’m twenty and you’re sixteen. When you were born, I could’ve killed you easy. Right now, I can vote and I can smoke without having to hide it. I easily broke through the 18+ barrier a whole two years ago. How about that!?”

“Well, that last one might be nice.”

“Is that so?”

Izumo ignored Kazami’s half-lidded glare and pointed at Hiba.

“How about this? Let’s spar while using wooden swords or something. If I win, you think about joining us in our fight.”

Someone reacted to that proposal, but it was not Hiba. It was Mikage.

“…”

She frantically peered into Hiba’s face and moved her lips to produce her silent voice.

“I oh’t ahnt aht.”

I don’t want that.

Kazami read her lips and her expression.

…What does that mean?

Hiba used a god of war to fight, so it was natural if he did not like joining them, but why would Mikage dislike when she only assisted?

…It can’t be.

A thought occurred to Kazami. Did Mikage want only Hiba to fight?

If so, that was a ridiculous idea. That meant wanting the one she cared for most to fight.

But was that how she felt?

As she looked at Hiba, the ends of her eyebrows were ever so slightly lowered and Kazami imagined unease resided behind that look.

…Is she worried that we will take their fight away from them?

If so, what would the two of them do?

"And what would we do? …Kaku, I know what it means to win this match."

"Yeah, but nothing will ever happen if we stay still. Doing nothing will only lead to the bell indicating time is up."

Izumo's tone was light, but she could see a harshness on his face.

She guessed that something had happened to him in the past that she was unaware of. Something in which he had remained motionless and come to regret it.

Hiba's eyebrows slowly rose and he nodded while drawing Mikage close.

"Giving thought to joining you if Izumo-san defeats me could work, but what will you do if I win? It would be pretty conceited of you to have not thought about it."

"Okay, how about this?" shouted Izumo with a smile. "Hiba, if you win, I'll act in your place and show some courage concerning Chisato's swimsuit! What do you think about that!?"

"Here's what *I* think about that!!"

Kazami punched Izumo.

Chapter 24

“Signs of an Approaching Enemy”

The footsteps of the past are quiet
The footsteps of the future are loud
Both of them pierce into something

●

It was an old district.

A canal was surrounded by willow trees and the dirt roads on either side were lined with white walls and wooden buildings.

The canal started from the west and made a right turn to the south partway through. Both stretches of the canal were approximately two hundred meters long.

“This is the Bikan district, isn’t it?”

Shinjou’s voice filled the area in front of a teahouse on the southern end of the district.

She wore a white straw hat and Sayama wore a vest and suit pants as they sat on a bamboo bench covered in a red cloth. They both held piles of copy paper, but Shinjou’s focus was constantly stolen by Sayama next to her and the unusual scenery around her.

She knew she had to take this more seriously, so she lowered her gaze to the documents while continuing to glance around.

The documents were the ones from UCAT’s central server that Kashima had sent them. They supposedly primarily held information on the National Defense Department, but they could not read most of it. They could tell the text was Japanese and that there were diagrams, but they simply could not comprehend the contents.

“This is an information hiding concept,” explained Sayama. “It must affect any copies of the information as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have heard the urban legends of information that curses you simply from hearing it, haven’t you? This is the same. A concept has been applied to the central server data that leaves some power with the information even as it is spread.” He smiled bitterly. “It is as if they expected we would do this.”

Kashima had apparently been unable to read most of it either, but he had selected what unreadable information seemed most important based on what he could read.

What Kashima could not read had a checkmark at the top of the page, but they had found they could read a bit of what he could not. Currently, Sayama was reading through Tsukuyomi’s Georgius report rather than the other documents.

Shinjou watched him reading the report and spoke.

“Director Tsukuyomi really is kind.”

“Kashima mentioned a reason for that. She is apparently searching for a Cowling Sword.”

“A Cowling Sword?”

He nodded and showed her a diagram below the Georgius report.

It was a design diagram for a Cowling Sword. It looked like a Japanese sword with almost no curve, but the hilt was oddly long. The hilt on the diagram was likely made of some hard substance and it was almost half as long as the blade.

“Why is she searching for this?”

“It seems her husband created it during UCAT’s blank period. This is the reason she agreed to join UCAT after the great Kansai earthquake ten years ago. She found this diagram in the back of a drawer of the desk she inherited upon taking over the development department and it is currently all she has found about it.”

The copy of the design diagram was signed by a Tsukuyomi Aruhito.

Sayama placed Georgius’s report aside and reached for the same documents Shinjou was reading.

“What did it say about Georgius?”

“There seem to be a lot of unknowns, but Director Tsukuyomi and Kashima both think that gauntlet may be alive and that it is merely sleeping while possessing a will of its own.”

“Then was it made by 3rd-Gear? Living metal is a 3rd concept.”

“When I first put it on, it spoke in Japanese rather than some strange Gear’s language.” He took a breath. “The report speculates it acts as a concept pressurizer, but it is unknown why it only reacts to Concept Cores or why only I can wear it.”

Shinjou almost commented how they seemed to know nothing, but she swallowed her words. Sayama already knew that and there was nothing they could do about it.

She then realized that his right hand had been placed on the left side of his chest for a while.

When she knew he was feeling that pain, she could do nothing but place her hand on his back. However, her thoughts seemed to get through to him because he finally spoke while arranging the bottom of the Georgius report on his lap.

“It was said that my mother obtained it and left it for me. In that

case, it would be best to assume it was made by UCAT using inferior copies of concepts from 3rd-Gear and other Gears. It seems Director Tsukuyomi and the others intend to look more deeply into this data, so let us hope they find something. …More importantly, what about your documents?"

"Eh?'

"Do not tell me you have not actually been reading them."

He was exactly right.

"Um, well. uh… Oh, hasn't it been about an hour and a half? Your handheld recorder is going to run out of material, isn't it? C-c'mon, let's head back and read this stuff with the others."

As she tried to smooth things over, Sayama removed the bag containing the recorder and bugs. He removed the recorder from the bag, pulled another recorder from his pocket, and placed it in the bag.

"Sayama-kun, wh-what was that?"

"No need to worry. That was the second scenario. The previous one was the indoor version and this is the outdoor version. I also have the adventure version, happy version, demon king version, and more. How about listening to one to give you some ideas for your novel plot?"

"No thanks. That would probably make me want to rethink a lot of things.

"I see. That is somewhat disappointing. At any rate, it is time for the outdoor version. Do your best, recorder."

"W-wait! Outdoors!? I'm not into that kind of thing!"

"What are you talking about? Interests are not automatically present. They must be developed, Shinjou-kun."

"That may be true, but don't emphasize that here!"

"Anyway, keep in mind that you sabotaged our inspection of these documents when I ask for compensation later."

She groaned, but she did feel bad about it.

"Why were you negligent about something so important?" he asked with a tilt of the head.

"Um, well… It's the first time I've been somewhere like this with you."

She was not sure what to say, but she made up her mind as she lightly embraced her own body. She shrank down and wondered if

he would forgive her if she explained.

"I don't have much experience going to strange places like this, but you can sit here drinking tea and reading documents like it's nothing. …It made me realize how mysterious a person you are."

"I see. Is that why you were staring at your surroundings and at me? Especially as I was lost in work?"

"Well…"

"Sigh… I may always gather the public eye, but even I will feel embarrassed if you do that, Shinjou-kun."

"U-um? Please don't tease me like that. B-but…" She felt herself blush and lowered her head. "It is true I was staring at you."

"I see. Then I will forgive you, but only if you will let me stare at you in fascination sometime."

"Okay, that would be fine… Wait, no! You never said what part of me, when it would be, or how you would do it!"

Despite her protests, Sayama pulled a memo pad from his pocket, wrote an entry titled "Promise" and wrote "All of her – Anytime – While unwrapped" below it.

"You are not 'unwrapping' me!"

He nodded and added "Discussion needed".

"Ahh…"

Shinjou hung her head limply. A discussion was out of the question. A Sayama discussion was especially out of the question. She had no chance of winning. The word "discussion" took on a completely different meaning and he would force his view onto her.

…Is there any way to oppose him on this?

As she thought about it, she felt heat gather in her face, but she told herself it was due to the weather.

Meanwhile, Sayama slowly closed the memo pad next to her.

When she looked up and turned toward him, he used the pile of documents as a fan to create breeze in her direction.

"At any rate, I have only glanced through these documents, but it seems to contain a few fascinating pieces of information. Let us go for a stroll. There are some things I wish to investigate, including the location of 3rd-Gear's base."

As soon as he spoke, an electronic tone sounded from his pocket.

It was his cell phone, so he removed Baku from the pocket, placed the creature on his head, and removed the phone.

“——————”

“It is Kazami,” he informed Shinjou.

After exchanging a few words, he hung up.

He took a breath, looked down at her, and spoke expressionlessly.

“It seems the Hiba boy and Izumo will be having a sparring match. Ridiculously enough, they have bet the Hiba boy’s cooperation on the match.”

“Y-you mean…?”

“Yes. That is a bit much to decide on their own, but they have now received my permission.”

“You’re okay with it?”

“If Izumo wins, all is well. If the Hiba boy wins, I can be his next opponent as the true star. If the Hiba boy complains, I can claim Izumo has no human rights or make some other excuse.”

“Will an excuse like that actually work? …No, I’m sure you’ll make it work with sophistry.”

“Sophistry? How rude, Shinjou-kun. Refer to it as a creative argument. At any rate, we cannot arrive in time, so we must leave this to them.”

He looked inside the teashop and spoke to the female worker inside.

“Excuse me, I would like the bill and six sticks of dango wrapped so we can eat as we walk.”

●

Two people stood on the beach.

They both wore T-shirts and shorts and they both held wooden swords in their right hands.

They had different builds.

The roar of the sea washed over the two, one of whom was short and the other of whom was larger and a head taller.

Spectators gathered in front of the rocky area across from the sea. At the head of the crowd was a girl in a T-shirt and swimsuit who held a whistle.

“Okay, Team Leviathan Representative Izumo Kaku vs…um…”

“Kazami-san, how about Nice Guy Representative Hiba Ryuuji?”

Without agreeing, Kazami gave a half-hearted blow of the

whistle.

"Okay, okay. Now start."

"Ah, that's even worse than being ignored!!" shouted Hiba.

However, his expression changed once he looked toward the girl sitting next to Kazami.

His loose expression became a smile.

His smile was directed at a girl with long, blonde hair who showed no sign of sweating despite wearing a long black shirt and a white dress. She simply looked back at him with no discernable expression.

"Don't worry. I'll do something about this, Mikage-san."

After a short pause, Mikage nodded.

She held her cane close and nodded again.

Around a dozen seconds had passed since the whistle had been blown, but both Hiba and Izumo remained motionless on the beach near the crashing waves.

Hiba stared forward where Izumo stood approximately five meters away.

He stood on the flat beach with the ocean to his right and the rocky area to his left.

They both held wooden swords as weapons. Hiba specialized in unarmed combat, but he was well-versed in using a sword thanks to his grandfather.

…And I often use a sword when fighting gods of war.

3rd-Gear did have projectile weapons, but one's vision and predictive calculation speed were assisted by the machine while joined with it. One's desires acted as a switch to zoom in on an opponent's movements, view them in slow motion, or even anticipate them.

It was possible to view the path of a bullet and most concept-powered optical weapons were too weak to pierce his armor, so he could predictively evade or ignore projectiles.

However, doing that repeatedly could put a strain on the machine.

He primarily focused on strength and speed more than evasion.

What he needed was an iai strike or a barrage at too close a range to give them time to react.

And with his short body, Hiba had trained in attack methods that

included quick rotation.

That was an effective method against large opponents and he could end everything with a quick series of attacks if he got in close.

His current opponent, Izumo, was plenty large for that to work.

Hiba was approximately 160 cm while Izumo was 190 cm.

Hiba could target the gut just by crouching while Izumo could only attack from overhead.

…Did he suggest wooden swords to give himself the reach he needs to hit me?

Even if his hands would not reach, he could use the sword to strike from below.

…If that's what he's thinking, I can't let my guard down.

Hiba rotated his wooden sword with a light snap of the wrist and faced forward.

"Now, let's get started."

"Sure."

At some point, Izumo had balanced his sword on top of his head, so he grabbed it with his right hand once more.

The surrounding crowd stopped moving and a tense atmosphere spread throughout them. Amid that silence, Izumo spoke.

"I'm a little reluctant to do this, but come on."

Hiba frowned at that.

"What? You were the one that suggested this, so why are you reluctant?"

"Win or lose, this is going to bring about some unpleasant thoughts."

"I thought you enjoyed fighting."

"Oh, the fighting will be enjoyable. For me, at least," he said. "But what about you? As your upperclassman, it's difficult to get into the mood."

Izumo then took a casual step forward.

The distance between them closed and the battlefield grew smaller.

While still facing forward, Hiba checked the left and right of the battlefield out of the corners of his eyes.

He saw ocean to the right, rocks to the left, and Mikage and Kazami in front of the rocks.

Next to Kazami, the German UCAT inspector named Diana was

sipping juice in a chair below a beach parasol, but he felt that black and gold swimsuit of hers was downright criminal.

…Mikage-san looks worried, but that look is cute too. Ahh, I just want to rub her head.

As he thought that, Izumo stopped in front of him.

They were five meters apart, so either one could attack after taking a few steps.

Hiba saw Izumo looking at him while checking on Kazami out of the corner of his eye.

Hiba suspected he was thinking something similar or possibly something even more amazing.

Hiba felt a sudden an affinity with his opponent in this sparring battlefield.

"…"

But Izumo adjusted his grip on the wooden sword in his right hand.

He was indeed going for an attack from below. In fact, he held the bottom of the sword in his palm as if to strike a staff straight down.

…Is he going for a one-handed strike?

Using both hands gave strength to a slashing attack, but it led to a slower initial speed. A single-handed swing using a snap of the wrist and raised elbow gave speed.

Izumo's stance showed he was wary of Hiba's speed.

His expression looked a bit sleepy and thus was difficult to read, but Hiba thought he saw some thought there.

Izumo brought his left leg forward and out a bit. That allowed him to immediately move his body if Hiba moved to the right.

If Hiba instead moved to the left, he only needed to swing the sword in his right hand.

…In that case…

Charging straight forward would be safest.

If he did that, the wooden sword in Izumo's right hand would be the greatest threat. A snap of the wrist could send the sword tip shooting up from the ground and it would be below Hiba's range of vision as he approached.

It was possible he would receive a sudden blow to the jaw or side.

Hiba's own attack would have reached by then, but their different

body sizes would create a difference in damage absorption and the speed of Hiba's advance would add to the strength of the counter against him.

His opponent might be able to withstand the blow, but he might not be able to.

And what would he do after he avoided the first attack?

Izumo was larger than him and he would not go down from any normal attack. He was perfectly fine after Kazami's attacks, so it would require a fair bit of damage to defeat him.

Nevertheless, Hiba knew he could do it.

He wanted to defeat Izumo even if it was not a complete victory.

He had a single reason for this.

…I can't let them get any more involved.

He wanted to protect his exclusive right to battle 3rd-Gear. He had realized that once more when Mikage had clung to him earlier. He and she would be the ones to fight 3rd-Gear.

He did not want to rely on their strength and – as rude as it was to his upperclassmen – he would make it very clear who was stronger by defeating Izumo here.

He briefly thought about Sayama's presence, but he doubted that boy outdid Izumo when it came to combat ability.

In that case, defeating Izumo held real meaning.

…What should I do?

He answered that question in an instant.

In the blink of an eye, he realized what actions he should take.

This was nothing special. His long years of combat experience put together the actions he should take and simulated the flow of events leading to victory.

"…"

All that remained was the start signal. He waited for his moment to act which would be when his opponent showed an opening.

And that moment arrived.

It took the form of Kazami's voice from the spectator group.

"Kaku! Try to keep your expression more serious."

Hiba interpreted that as a form of cheering, just not one he would ever receive.

In response, Izumo frowned and turned toward Kazami.

"Y'know…"

Hiba used that instant to move toward him by kicking deep into the sand and leaning forward.

“!”

He travelled half the distance with his first step.

He was on his way to end the sparring match.

Afterword

Here we are with Part B. I only have two pages for the afterword for the first time in a long while, so I cut out Ya-san's section. I apologize to anyone looking forward to it. He was the one that would often tell me to shorten the novel. Did you hear that, Ya-san? You're what got cut.

Anyway, I can only do this thanks to all of your support. Thank you very much.

This one has taken the irregular structure of a three-parter. How did that happen? Oh, and I visited Kurashiki last summer while gathering material for this novel. The theme park north of Kurashiki Station has built a few dioramas and robots inside a pavilion near my parents' home, so it was oddly familiar.

The trip to gather material was a lot of fun. I almost died doing so much walking under the hot sun, the guy running the Ferris wheel was worried about my life and asked if I was lonely when I rode it again and again to get a good look at the city, and the hotel bath clogged up and the water just about flooded the living room. Oh, but the food was good and the scenery was nice.

At any rate, I like to think the fruits of those labors are showing themselves here.

Now for a forceful chat. Let's get started.

"Could you tell me a painful story from your middle or high school days?"

"Hmm. When I was in middle school, the shop class had a device that showed you how a bicycle chain rotates. It had all the unnecessary covers removed so you could see how it worked inside."

"And?"

"One day, I was spinning it during class and wanted to see how fast the chain was going, so I pressed my finger against it. The chain caught on my work glove and dragged my finger right between the front gear and chain."

"Oh, ouch! And that isn't quite what I meant by painful."

"They had to open three holes in the gear, I had to get four stiches, and the doctor had to remove the fingernail."

This is gradually turning into the section for unpleasant memories.

Anyway, you can use Underworld's Two Months Off as the battle BGM for the latter half of this third story. (I want to fight to that kind of expansive song.) I listened to it a lot while editing.

"Who exactly will kill themselves?"

I also thought about that.

Now then, now then. Part C will be out soon.

April 2004. A morning of falling snow.

-Kawakami Minoru

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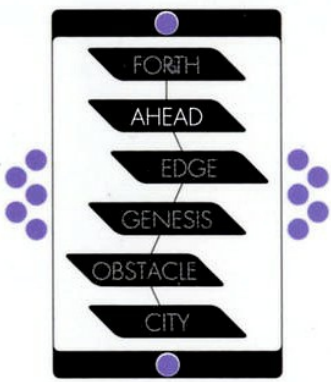

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